University of Alberta

Western Feminism and Aboriginal Ceremonialism

by

Leta Susan Houle

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Abstract

Some Aboriginal women believe that the more public roles during Aboriginal sacred ceremonies should not be the exclusive domain of men, while others believe that women's supportive roles are more important than ever. This paper looks at both perspectives, with emphasis on the Plains Cree traditions, and how the history of colonization has influenced and impacted Aboriginal women's involvement in their Nations' ceremonies.

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Chapter 1

OUTLINING THE ARGUMENT

Over the last three decades, feminism has argued that serious gender inequality exists within western religions. At the same time, there has also been a feminist voice emerging to address the issue of gender equality within certain Aboriginal religions. Furthermore, in Canada, the two hundred years of legislation that has controlled the movements of People[1], and disallowed religious expression[2] has also created categories such as: "urban," "grassroots," "Status," "traditional," "apple." Though these labels appear to be simple words to non-Aboriginal people, in "Indian Country" they carry huge repercussions for an individual's identity and, even more specifically, how they should think, understand Life[3], and believe.

First Nations have so many voices, so many cultures, and so many experiences, that a unified voice is impossible. However, to mainstream Canada there is only the voice of the *"First Nations,"* and First Nations understand this. When a voice emerges from within to criticize or critique First Nations openly, the effect to mainstream Canadians is minimal. However, the ramifications within the Aboriginal community to that one voice can be

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[1] "People," refers to Indigenous people. In many Indigenous languages, the name of the tribe or Nation translates to "the People."

[2] *1895 Amendment to the Indian Act: Section 114*: " Every Indian or other person who engages in, or assists in celebrating or encourages either directly or indirectly another to celebrate, an Indian festival, dance or other ceremony of which the giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods, or articles or any sort forms a part, or is a feature, whether such gift of money, goods or articles takes place before, at, or after the celebration of the same, and every Indian or other person who engages or assists in any celebration or dance of which the wounding or mutilation of the dead or living body of any human being or animal forms a part or is a feature, is guilty of an indictable offence."

[3] Life: Universal life, the cosmos and all living entities.

dramatic. Nevertheless, after three decades of fighting for equal rights as citizens of Canada, the separate voices of Aboriginal women are finally being heard both among the People themselves and in the wider Canadian public. While, in general, they address many of the common problems facing all First Nations---poverty, racism, and legislated discrimination. In very recent times Aboriginal religions have been criticized by some First Nations activists especially for the lack of women in prominent positions.

This "western" expression of feminism within First Nations is encouraging to some and distressing to others. Aboriginal cultures that are criticized are the societies that have men in the primary roles in religious ceremonies, among them the Algonquian Plains cultures which originated from eastern woodland homelands. Tribes that went from a Woodland based society which feature individual religious specialists such as conjurers[4] became part of a Plains based society which has considerably less individual specialists and large group gatherings such as the Sun Dance.

Two of these tribes were the Plains Cree and Saulteaux. Henry Youle Hind in the late 1850's reported, "Many of the wood Indians now keep horses, and enjoy the advantage of making the prairie and the forest tributary to their wants" (as quoted in Peers, 153). According to David G. Mandelbaum, the Plains Cree had similar livelihoods to the Plains Ojibwa and harvested maple sugar like the Ojibwa (76). Both tribes originated from around the Great Lakes and woodlands of the Canadian Shield. These two tribes are similar and

---

[4] Conjuring is performed by an individual in a "shaking tent" ceremony, in which the conjurer connects with their spirit guides. They do not go into a trancelike state, nor are they possessed.

unique because the value of women diminished considerably as they became part of the Plains culture.

> The ceremonies that the Ojibwa adopted and purchased from the Cree were virtually all male-oriented. Women participated in some, including the Sun Dance, but they played lesser roles in the ceremonies and stood to gain fewer social or spiritual benefits from performing them. All in all, plains Ojibwa men stood to gain far more prestige, self-esteem, and material and social benefits from participating in the bison hunt, the robe and pemmican trade, and the *okitcita* and other societies than did their female relatives. (Peers 189)

Questioning Aboriginal women's roles within certain ceremonies is parallel to the stance that western feminism takes towards western religions, especially when accounts exists of Aboriginal women holding more prominent positions in their societies prior to the adoption of a Plains culture. Prior to the movement west, Plains Algonquian women had already been experiencing their diminished importance within their societies during the years of the fur trade and missionary involvement.

Feminism in modern religious life challenges the long held belief that women ought not to take a leadership role within a certain faith tradition. Feminism, addresses not only the refusal to accept women as teachers and developers of a religion, but challenges the dismissal of their experiences with the Divine. At issue is whether the religion under discussion can accommodate a change in the traditional position of women. Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the premier scholars of religious feminism believes that Western, Eastern and Tribal religions have not allowed or accepted divine experience to be expressed

or defined by women (Ruether 142). This particular view of feminism is problematic in both world religions and for traditional women of Indigenous religions because of its "western" flavour. Feminism has developed under an atmosphere of specific cultural and political challenges in the western world and generally refers to complete equality at any time and in any situation. Randi R. Warne states,

> The asymmetry of androcentrism assumes that what men do is of pre-eminent human importance. The "self-evidence" of that importance is then naturalized and its gender-embeddedness obscured. When men then do what now is considered "objectively" important (often because it is "public," itself a construct and consequence of a particular gender ideology), men and their actions become not only a "serious" subject for intellectual investigation and analysis, but also *representative* of humanity overall forthcoming. In similar circular fashion, what women do is less important by definition, because women do it; alternately, what women do is important only in the terms set down for them within the androcentric frame. (Warne151)

Western feminism within religious expression challenges the assumption that male public duties automatically are regarded as important or legitimate, while various female expressions are dismissed because they are not public, or impose restrictions for public performance. This view, even if removed from its western context, makes religious feminism difficult to accommodate in Indigenous circles. Aboriginal plains cultures existed within an economy and culture that rewarded manly traits of bravery, horse stealing and hunting; ceremonial life reflected the need for spiritual help in those areas. Other Plains

societies such as the Lakota, who had their ceremonies given to them by Buffalo Calf Woman in their mythology, have managed to incorporate women into their warrior-plains society. But the large Algonquian societies of Cree and Ojibwa originated in a different culture where gender was not viewed in the same way. Hunting and gathering societies required all members to actively contribute. Ceremonial life was performed more by specialists rather than everyone being involved in a large event like the Sun Dance in the booming economy of the Plains. As Europeans arrived to settle, religious life and the focus on hunting and survival became of utmost importance. It wasn't a time to see if women would fare better as ceremonial leaders, which would have required a new set of ceremonies, new spirit guides and new spiritual helpers. The alternative to Aboriginal ceremonies was and continues to be Christianity rather than a challenge of the spiritual entities which already exist within each Aboriginal culture.

Traditional roles and their re-interpretation today

Patriarchal Aboriginal religions appear to have comparable issues within them with regards to women performing primary roles within the sacred ceremonies. A natural assumption for Aboriginal feminists is that the gender inequality experienced by women within their daily life is reflected in the religious life. This challenge is not viewed as relevant by grassroots Aboriginal women because of the understanding of what is at the core of Aboriginal ceremonialism. Individuals do not hold power, so wanting a more prominent public display within ceremonies appears to be more about a person's ego and desire for power than it does of about understanding where the spiritual power originates.

Aboriginal women who have adopted the white, liberal, western feminist view of

inequality believe women should have equal acceptance as ceremonial leaders, basing this on gender inequality rather than on spiritual beliefs. But just as mainstream feminism has been challenged as *the* voice for all women, Aboriginal feminists are also being challenged as the voice for all Aboriginal women. When the Aboriginal feminist view is applied to Aboriginal religions, it assumes a similar type of female subordination as is found in western religions because of the dominant role men have within the public ceremonies. Such an assumption is, in most cases, incorrect.

A good case in point is the Sun Dance. It is one of the common ceremonies amongst Aboriginal Nations of the Plains, but the name and the circular structure of the ceremonial construction is all that is similar across the many cultures that make up the Plains peoples. Each Nation that performs the Sun Dance has different rituals, with varying lengths of time, arising from different mythologies.

For example, the Plains Cree territory in Canada runs across Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and into the United States, where local influences have modified some aspects of the ceremony. Within the Plains Cree Nation, the Sun Dance varies as well due to the adoption of other ceremonial traditions from neighbouring tribes, so this central ceremony can take on very diverse forms, even within Plains tradition. For our purposes, the Plains Cree or Grassland Cree Sun Dance as practiced in central and southern Saskatchewan will be the tradition taken as normative for this discussion.

Within the anthropology and sociological studies on Plains Cree, the primary expert for most of the last sixty-five years has been Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*. This work was originally his dissertation in 1936. Since that

time, his work has been the most complete and comprehensive study of Plains Cree ways of life and the changes which occurred. His study focussed more on the way of life prior to reservation life, when many of his informants could still remember their free range lifestyles of buffalo hunting. He states:

> Despite the physical deprivations and personal tribulations that had overwhelmed them after the buffalo were killed off, many of them remained strong in their personalities, devoted to the aboriginal values and rituals, determined that they and their children were to remain Plains Cree in personal identity and group loyalty despite direct efforts by government officials and constant pressures by others to diminish that identity. (Mandelbaum, xiv)

Other than the oral history of Plains Cree, Mandelbaum was the only scholar to record why and how certain rituals were performed. The Sun Dance was one of those rituals he recorded, but even so the mythology behind the ceremony, with its important female component, was lacking. The only mention of women's involvement was how they may have painted their faces, where they stood and finally the general rule for women: "While a woman might receive vision sanction to make a Sun dance and could vow to give one, she herself could not conduct the ceremony" (Mandelbaum 199). The Pledger was always to be a man.

The reasoning behind the "men only" rule for Pledgers was apparently never queried by Mandelbaum, and perhaps for that time in history, not doing so was only natural. Still, modern feminist scholars have addressed early research for its male-biased

method of collection from the beginning. Those Europeans that had first contact and knowledge of Aboriginal religions, that is the missionaries and early scholars, saw a similar patriarchal structure in their Christianity; therefore any questions regarding women's roles within the culture or belief system were overlooked, or glossed over since they believed that First Nations were no different from Europeans. The 'logical' perception was that if women were not in the primary roles within ceremonies then their position within that culture *must* be relegated to second-class citizens.

Indeed, there were instances when the European witness was at a loss to explain women's roles in rituals. Consider this selection from *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie:*

> They still entertain a great dread of their natural enemies, but they are since become so well armed, that the others now call them their allies. The men are in general of a comely appearance, and fond of personal decoration. The women are of a contrary disposition, and the slaves of the men: in common with all the Indian tribes polygamy is allowed among them. They are very subject to jealousy, and fatal consequences frequently result from the indulgence of that passion. But notwithstanding the vigilance and severity which is exercised by the husband, it seldom happens that a woman is without her favourite, who, in the absence of the husband, exacts the same submission, and practices the same tyranny. And so premature is the tender passion, that it is sometimes known to invigorate so early a period of life as the age or eleven or twelve years. The women are not very prolific; a circumstance which may be attributed, in a great measure, to the hardships that

they suffer, for except a few small dogs, they alone perform that labour which is allotted to beasts of burden in other countries. It is not uncommon, while the men carry nothing but a gun, that their wives and daughters follow with such weighty burdens, that if they lay them down they cannot replace them, and that is a kindness which the men will not deign to perform; so that during their journeys they are frequently obliged to lean against a tree for a small portion of temporary relief. When they arrive at the place which their tyrants have chosen for their encampment, they arrange the whole in a few minutes, by forming a curve of poles, meeting at the top, and expanding into circles of twelve or fifteen feet diameter at the boom, covered with dressed skins of the moose sewed together.[5] During these preparations, the men sit down quietly to the enjoyment of their pipes, if they happen to have any tobacco. But notwithstanding this abject state of slavery and submission, *the women have considerable influence on the opinion of the men in every thing except their own domestic situation* [*emphasis added*]. (Lamb 254)

The complexity of women's roles in Cree culture

In fact, the Pledger in a Plains Cree Sun Dance is always male; however women's involvement is crucial. Within the structure of the lodge women are situated on the East side, separate from the men who are on the West. The circular structure with men located in various positions would have a significant portion of it visibly missing without the involvement of women participants, and their responses to the drumming and chants. Women who are not participating in the actual Lodge have other roles within the Sun Dance

[5] Mackenzie is describing the building of a tipi.

camp to support the Sun Dancers such as singing, watching children and cooking for the camp. However a few modern Aboriginal women are challenging the traditional "supportive" role of women in the Lodge and within the camp and questioning why they cannot be Pledgers too. Also emerging are debates about menstrual taboos that are still adhered to with varying degrees of strictness within the Sun Dance camp, and the relevance of such ancient customs in a modern era.

Aboriginal feminists question the origins of this patrimony of males within the ceremonies especially since men now have the social and financial control in their communities, a custom not traditional to Plains Cree. They also question the relevancy of menstrual taboos that aren't adhered to in everyday life, even if they were adhered to in pre-contact times or in times prior to Reservation life. They point out that women are not relegated to menstrual lodges during their menses in modern times[6], so question why it should only apply in ceremonies. They argue that in ordinary life situations they are expected to conduct themselves in the same manner as men, or as is practised by mainstream Canadian women. Menstruation is now seen as a punishment of young Aboriginal women because they cannot take part in ritual events, many of which have a strong social component. Though the disappointment by young women unable to participate in ceremonies during their menses is the same, the understanding of *why* has been lost by many Aboriginal men and women. There is little awareness of the reasons given by Mandelbaum:

---

[6] Given the nature of the Plains Cree and the adoption of other cultural traditions, some Plains Cree women would have had a moon-lodge, and some groups wouldn't.

> The presence of a menstruating woman was believed to defile a religious ceremony and she was forbidden to come in contact with any religious paraphernalia. If a menstruating woman were among the onlookers at any ceremony, the supernatural powers would take offense and bring about an untoward occurrence. (Mandelbaum 145)

Unlike other Plains Nations, Plains Cree women were generally not isolated in a "moon lodge"[7] during their menses, and were expected to continue contributing and working as they usually did, but if rest was needed the woman was expected to be responsible for what her body needs. The only requirement was that during her menses, she was expected/required to stay away from all sacred items.

Aboriginal women must then live with several different kinds of pressures: 1) their Aboriginal communities exist within Canadian society as a whole, and have had to conform to the general expectations placed on modern women; 2) western feminism adds another level of disadvantage that Aboriginal women face within the imposed Euro-Canadian patriarchal social structure, for they must conform to standards deriving from western feminism while trying to remain loyal to their own society's values; 3) While wishing to be traditional, Aboriginal women have a double-edged sword imposed upon them, for they are expected be "women" in the traditional sense during religious activities, yet are also expected to be sexually equal in keeping with modern social values in Canada.

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[7] A woman's period is usually referred to as being in her moon, or moon-time because it follows the cycles of the moon.

This situation has arisen because of the impact of changes on Aboriginal society. The modifications to Plains Cree social structure has changed women's lot drastically and, although it was a patriarchal system in the past, with leadership, politics and warfare the primary domain of men (there were some women warriors)[8], now the control of limited financial resources, housing and employment is almost entirely in the hands of men. Areas that were traditionally under the management of Aboriginal women in Plains Cree societies, (such as management/ownership[9] of the family tipi and furnishings), Euro-Canadian legislation and attitudes have turned over to the men. Aboriginal women must now negotiate several different kinds of value systems just to maintain a semblance of a traditional, normal life.

Feminism within Aboriginal communities is so much more complex because it does not seek sexual equality in all things; rather it demands the restoration of power and ranking women traditionally had before European influence. Furthermore, Aboriginal feminism does not have just the same kinds of cultural conflict with its society that traditional western feminism has had (lack of financial independence, lack of leadership roles)--rather it has additional tensions beyond those that Western feminism addressed in its beginnings. Aboriginal women must also face the cultural "disadvantages" that are placed upon them by their own people just because they are women. However, the subtle difference between Aboriginal feminism and Aboriginal women who are feminists in the western sense is the demand for sexual equality. Western feminism, adopted by Aboriginal

---

[8] A further discussion will follow in chapter three.

[9] The western understanding of ownership doesn't apply. Nothing within the tipi was owned forever and personal ownership was never permanent because of the prevalence of "gifting" within the tradition.

women, logically concludes that if women are not going to have their traditional authority recognized by their own culture, then the traditional gender-based religious and menstrual regulations should no longer be applicable either.

The Plains Cree Sun Dance is one ceremony in which aspects have recently been challenged by female scholars and participants. Countering the Aboriginal feminist voice is not just the voice of male ceremonialist; rather, the voice of traditional women is heard arguing that the Sun Dance is one of the few places in which they can still retain their traditional power and importance. These women understand what has occurred in their societies and know that children and women have suffered abuses never previously experienced - a direct outcome of Euro-Canadian legislation, mass displacement, and grief experienced by Aboriginal people as a whole. Traditional women maintain that the sacred ceremonies are the one place where communities act and behave towards women and children the way they once did, with their respect and reverence intact.

The challenge facing Plains Cree ceremonialism and other First Nations cultures is the waning number of surviving Elders and teachers who have not been indoctrinated into Christianity. These people are needed to maintain the integrity of the ceremonies without Christian syncretism. Many of the Elders of this era are Residential School survivors heavily indoctrinated in the Christian faith, and who consequently are unable to grasp the traditional view of women as being "divine-like" during their menses. Rather, menstruating women are seen as "dirty," and therefore legitimately banned.

> Our ways of dealing with taboos around menstruation are perhaps the most common example of the need for better education and a critical practice of

tradition. Ojibway Grandmother Vera Martin remembers once having to correct a Sun Dance leader who was explaining that menstruating women are "dirty." (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 37-38).

From an interview between scholar Koozma J. Tarasoff and Saulteaux Medicine Man Felix Panipekeesick from the Sakimay Reserve, SK. 1967:

> KT: I notice that women who have menstrual periods are not supposed to go inside the Rain Dance lodge.
>
> FP: No. They are not. Oh, they could look into the lodge from about here to that pole [50 or 100 feet] but they can't come in.
>
> KT: Do you know why this is so?
>
> FP: Well, you see, if a woman is like that and she comes in, then she will spoil everything. Supposing I was singing and she came in; in about five minutes I couldn't sing. I'd choke. That's why we don't let them come in. And all those dancers, you know, they'll just drop. All those that fast, you know.
>
> KT: Does this mean that the woman has some kind of a power when she has her menstrual periods?
>
> FP: No. She has no power at all. She can't come in there or else she'll spoil everything. (Tarasoff 114-115)

Aboriginal feminists fight this belief and argue that if Aboriginal men see them as dirty, that view isn't Traditional[10] and therefore the integrity of the Sun Dance is

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[10] Tradition with a capital "T" refers to the cultural and religious teachings of particular First Nation. It is an understanding that the individual functions within their daily life as their people did in the past or how they think they did in the past.

compromised. It is no longer a Plains Cree Sun Dance---it is a re-enactment without the Sacred being present.

Traditional women's views differ in that the Divine or the Sacred are always present if the symbols and intention of the people are present. These women do not care whether a man is correct or incorrect with his understanding of the ceremony and women's involvement. They understand their role and believe it is important to continue with their involvement. Plains Cree "Junior Elder" Wilma Schreder states,

> They [young Aboriginal women] are doing things now, making up their own ceremonies without utilizing the skills and teachings of our Elders. If they want to start drumming or doing other things like that, that isn't acceptable in our culture, then they need to go and be a part of that tribe where it is acceptable. Go join them. (Schreder 2004)

The elaboration of the argument in the following chapters

Aboriginal feminism that challenges the traditional roles of women in a Sun Dance is not welcomed by Traditional women. Rather than elevating women to the same importance as men, a Traditional woman sees this as a demotion - to be just like a man. These two opposing views within Aboriginal cultures and more specifically Plains Cree culture are unique. There are similarities to Religious Feminism, but because the traditional view of women within the religious life of Plains Cree was superior rather than inferior, Aboriginal feminism is mimicking feminism in its assumption that women need to have sexual equality, rather than the cultural understanding that religious expression and public display within ceremonies is necessary for men - because they aren't women.

In ensuing chapters, we will look at both the Aboriginal Western Feminists' view and the Traditional women's view. Why the problem of challenging ceremonial rituals exists, and why there is tension between Cree women and Western feminism. The Traditional understanding of ceremonies is not understood by many contemporary Aboriginal western feminists, highlighting another issue of questioning the value of Aboriginal religions. Traditionalists understand that cultures change, times change, but there is the acceptance that the origin of Aboriginal ceremonies is beyond the human realm. Women's role within ceremonies was not meant to be a subordinate one, though some view it that way. But by questioning the gender roles within ceremonies, Aboriginal western feminism (though not intentionally) puts a spotlight on faith, when viewing Indigenous beliefs. Modern Elders have their understanding of what women's roles are within the ceremonies, and whether or not the need for re-visioning it is necessary. Both Aboriginal western feminists and Traditionalists bring to the table why or why not change is needed, but also by what means change should occur.

Chapter 2

PROBLEMS AND TENSION OF CREE WOMEN WITH WESTERN FEMINISM

The trouble western feminism has for women of color is the historical context from which it originated. Liberal feminism grew out of Europe's middle class of the late 1700's questioning the right of kings and aristocracy, the Church's power and the inability of people who were not property owners to participate in political decisions (Elliot and Mandell, 4).

> "Feminism" as a word gained widespread usage in the western world in the 1890's. It emerged at this time as a way to identify individuals who supported not merely an increased public role for women but also women's right to define themselves as autonomous beings. (Elliot and Mandell 3)

However, *who* could be a part in the women's movement was in contention early on. Excluded from the movement were lesbian women, elderly women, women with disabilities and women of race. From the beginning of the women's movement, non-white women were excluded from the category of "woman," because of the overriding racism that prevailed during the colonist era.

> When white female and male members of the audience questioned her right to speak, the Black ex-slave woman, who supported the women's suffrage movement at the same time as she worked for the abolition of slavery and helped countless slaves escape along the underground railroad to freedom in

> the northern states and Canada, strode to the podium and demanded to know "a'n't I a woman?" She, who had borne thirteen children and nursed them and seen almost all of them sold into slavery while she had borne the lash and a burden of hard labour in the field equal to that borne by Black slave men, returned again and again to the repeating refrain: "And a'n't I a woman?" (Pierson 196-197)

The exclusion of women of color and more specifically Aboriginal women has made Euro-Canadian feminism contentious as a platform for Aboriginal women's rights. Canadian colonization and its ideals, its national understandings, are white. The language used everyday still refers to women of color, women who don't speak English well, and women from the Third World as "immigrant women" (Dua 14). However, First Nations' women are in their own category belonging to the "Fourth World," or an impoverished community within the larger, First World Canada.

Feminism as a struggle is often put aside in the interests of women choosing nationhood, or nationalism which limits their choices for personal autonomy (Stasiulis 182). Non-Native scholar Agnes Grant struggles with feminism and its applicability to First Nations, and the agendas of white feminism which would not be accepted or applicable to First Nations communities. When the Charlottetown Accord debated First Nation's right to self-government, Grant had to take sides (Grant 56). For many Aboriginal women, the historic "whiteness" of feminism still exists, and when push comes to shove, feminism has nothing to do with First Nations' struggles within Canada. Tracey Lindberg asserts in her article, "Not My Sister: What Feminists Can Learn about Sisterhood from Indigenous

Women," that assumptions feminism makes about sexual equality taking precedence over her own Aboriginal history, race, language and traditions are troubling (342). The experiences of non-Native women and Aboriginal women are too different, and Lindberg finds that when non-Native women assume there is a commonality in the feminist movement for all women, it simply isn't true. "It must be painful to hear it, and I am certain that it is not easily accepted. You are not our sisters by virtue of gender. Gender does not address our spiritual and cultural obligations" (347).

Grace Ouellette's *The Fourth World: An Indigenous Perspective on Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Activism* maintains that non-Native feminist writers in the past focussed on the oppression of Native women by men, rather than the *Indian Act* (Ouellette 31). The values and traditions of each Aboriginal Nation was not taken into consideration, rather feminist writers applied their own Eurocentric views (35). It was assumed by most writers in the field that both Native and White men have oppressed Native women. They dismiss the fact that Aboriginal men and women lived in societal structures accepted by both genders prior to European arrival. Noted feminist scholars such as Sylvia Van Kirk, Julia Cruikshank or Jennifer Brown who have written on the experiences of Native women in the past, have faced criticism for not including general discussions on the overall oppression of Aboriginal people by European colonizers.

Cultural bias can only exist when no other voice is heard. Throughout the history of colonization interpretations of Aboriginal women's roles has been by European men. This in turn has been taken by feminist scholars to analyze through their own experiences of dealing with Euro-Canadian men. The roles Aboriginal women had within their societies

spiritually have been largely ignored by feminist scholars. Their focus has been on the discrepancies between the sexes, because that has been the struggle in their own culture. The focus of Aboriginal feminists has been the power women held socially (Medicine 123). The trend to give a different view of Aboriginal societies and show the power women possessed with little discussion of the cultural context for the mention of such cultural figures as the Siouan Buffalo Calf Woman, or the Diné Changing Woman, makes understanding the culture impossible. Focusing on how much power Indigenous women had prior to European interference is offensive to many First Nations women. Feminist scholars, new-age practitioners and non-Native women, who have clambered on to this idea of "power" and used it to aid in their own individual identities, discount the Nation it comes from.

'White' Feminism

First Nations women are very aware of how enamoured some non-Native women are with romanticized notions of the utopian societies Indigenous women lived in. This is not connected intellectually by these women to the overall racist attitudes that prevail amongst non-Native Canadians (Grant 56; Donaldson 677). Although white feminist organizations have given their support to Aboriginal women in such cases as the passing of Bill C-31 in 1985 which applied the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to the *Indian Act* (Pierson 197-199), Aboriginal women still do not feel they are equals.

> No one makes the mistake of referring to us as ordinary women. White women invite us to speak if the issue is racism or Native people. We are there to teach, to sensitize them or to serve them in some way. We are expected to

> retain our position well below them, as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of "their movement"—the women's movement. (Maracle, Lee 18)

The history of discrimination towards white women is sexual in nature, based on gender and rooted in women's inferiority and weakness. In the Americas, white women were to be protected by their husbands and were completely dependent on them. Men were responsible for her food, clothing, children and protection against the Indians (Hill 18). Native women, however, were nothing like the white women. Native women were viewed as embodying unbridled passion; wild and without modesty. New World women were so "lustful and promiscuous" that they made eunuchs of their male counterparts (Guerrero 116).

> For the women, being very lustful, cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed and disgusting: and this is accomplished by a certain device of theirs, the biting of certain poisonous animals. And in consequence of this many lose their organs which break for lack of attention, and they remain eunuchs... The women as I have said go naked and are very libidinous; yet they have bodies that are tolerably beautiful and cleanly. Nor are they plump, their ugliness is less apparent, which indeed is for the most part concealed by the excellence of their body structure. It was to us a matter of astonishment that none was to be seen among them who had a flabby breast... and in the other parts of the body

similar things were seen of which in the interest of modesty I make no mention. (Vespucci)

Aboriginal women cannot stand in unison with women who do not take their real-life struggles to heart, but continue to allow inappropriate behaviour towards Indigenous culture as a whole, in ways Aboriginal women are expected to overlook. Appropriation of culture: authentic *living culture* or fictitious, continues to this day with little criticism or question by non-Natives. Eurocentric feminism has taken the symbol of Native women's "unconstrained sexuality" for their own sexual liberation (Guerrero 116) and given *historic* Indigenous women credit for what they desire within their own societies.

Feminists are drawn to the view of matriarchal or egalitarian societies which were once common in Old Europe during the Neolithic era. However, they are not as interesting or useful when there are modern examples of such societies western feminists can access now. The traditional rights for Native women within various Nations: authority over their own birth control, decision to end a marriage or control over the domestic property was not an "individual" decision, as some feminist scholars have noted. Decisions within a woman's sphere of influence were made with the contributions and opinions of Elderly women, other female relatives, Clanswomen or members of the woman's Society (if there was one). There wasn't the notion that women's domains were personal and separate because of the effects to marriage ties and immediate family (Guerrero116). Indigenous traditions contain the recognition of women as separate and autonomous beings, but the inability by western feminism to view the kinship ties as indistinguishable from individual sexuality within

Indigenous cultures is continued proof that the chasm between First Nations women and white women is still vast.

> The belief that the traditions of others may be appropriated to serve the needs of the self is a peculiarly Western notion that relies on a belief that knowledge is disembodied rather than *embedded in relationships, intimately tied to place, and entails a responsibility to others and a commitment and discipline in learning.* (Talamantez 386) [*Emphasis added*]

The hierarchy which Aboriginal women feel exists includes the treatment of Aboriginal men by white women. The continuation of paperback romance novels featuring white heroines and Native men have not diminished in popularity. "Check out the Western section of the local paperback book shelves and you will see cover after cover of Indian men in passionate and romantic embraces with not-so-helpless white women" (Hill 23). Laura E. Donaldson asserts this reality in her article "On Medicine Women and White Shame-ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism" while exploring the reactions of novelist Lynn V. Andrews in her book *Medicine Woman*.[11]

> The abrupt shift of feelings...exposes an astonishingly vulnerable moment within Andrew's psychic and social imaginary. The realization that the figures walking toward her are both masculine and Indian triggers a profound experience of dread, which quickly transforms itself to anger. While I do not wish to minimize women's genuine fear of rape, I would also argue that the context of *Medicine Woman* suggests a very different origin for

[11] New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1981.

> Andrew's strong emotional response: the stereotype of Native men as either hypersexual, violent, and terrifyingly other, or docile colonial servants. (687)

As Richard Hill states in "Savage Splendor: Sex, Lies and Stereotypes," "Unbridled lust did not wear clothes. To be captured by Indian men was considered a fate worse than death for a white woman" (18). Perceiving First Nations men as the mystical "Other," treating them with disdain, disgust, fear or as sexual objects (something feminism as a whole objects to when applied to women), unites First Nations women with their men, and makes racism and prejudices the issues rather than sexual equality.

Over and over, despite abuse or abandonment First Nations women will side with their men. While women have maintained their traditional roles with Aboriginal societies (Voyageur 94), those of mother, grandmother, keepers of culture and maintaining the family unit, Aboriginal men have lost almost all their traditional roles of providers and protectors (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 239). Aboriginal women blame Canadian legislation and Canadian racism for what their men do. While the helplessness, the frustration and the violence exhibited by Native men towards their women and children is painful and destructive; it is understandable and, in some ways, is tolerated[12] (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 240; Grant 57; Lindberg 350). This ability to include men, unite with men and unite as a Nation has become the fine-line which is being drawn between Traditional women and Feminist women within Aboriginal Canada.

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[12] This does not mean forgiven in the context that an assault or abuse is all right; rather I am reminded of a conversation in which a therapist who worked with Native couples offered her viewpoint (because of confidentiality, I do not want to record her name). She noted that despite the level of violence, couples will "go to the mat" in order to keep the relationship together because of their shared cultural understandings and/or Nationhood.

Aboriginal Feminism

Native feminism discussed here is not the Fourth World Feminism that would be referred to as "Post-Colonial" feminism; it is women who adopt the western view of feminism while claiming or maintaining their Aboriginal identity. First Nations have always understood the value of a united front against mainstream society. However, the cracks appearing amongst Aboriginal women are exposing the long-term effects of sexist legislation, cultural loss and lack of communal ties.

To simplify this discussion and not dwell too much on *Indian Act* legislation (not the focus of this paper) a brief explanation is needed for the major offences.

Indian Act 1869 Sec.6: Though not the "official" Indian Act which compiled all the previous legislation that had developed over the Colonial government's dealings with the First Nations, the section mentioned was referred to in a letter to the Minister of Indian Affairs in 1872 from the Grand Council of Ontario and Quebec Indians:

> They [the members of the Grand Council] also desire amendments to Sec.6 of the Act of [18]69 so that Indian women may have the privilege of marrying when and whom they please, without subjecting themselves to the exclusion or expulsion from their tribes and the consequent loss of property and rights they may have by virtue of their being members of any particular tribe. (NAC RG10, Red Series, Vol. 1934, file 3541) (Leslie and Maguire 55)

Indian Act 1876, Sec. 3(3): Defines who is an "Indian" under the terms of the *Act*. They are "*First*. Any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band; *Secondly*. Any child of such person; *Thirdly*. Any woman who is or was lawfully married to

such person…" This section allows for white women who marry Native men to become "Indians" under the *Act*, but removes Native women who marry non-Indians (Métis, non-Status or white men) from the category of "Indian" within the *Act* (Canada, "Excerpts from the Indian Act, 1876" 498-499).

Indian Act 1876, Sec. 61: To break the Six Nations military and political structure, Section 61of the *Act* only allowed men over twenty-one the ability to vote at council meetings (only legitimate if held in the presence of the Superintendent-General), and removed the involvement of women in the political process (Canada, "Excerpts from the Indian Act, 1876" 503). The "Great Binding Law," or *Gayanerekowa: The Constitution of the Five Nations Confederacy*.[13] Section 18 states:

> If at any time it shall be manifest that a Confederate Chief has not in mind the welfare of the people or disobeys the rules of the Great Law, the men or the women of the Confederacy, or both jointly, shall come to the Council and upraid the erring Chief, through his War Chief. If the complaint of the people through the War Chief is not heeded the first time it shall be uttered again and then if no attention is given a third complaint and a warning shall be given. If the Chief is still contumanious the matter shall go to the Council of War Chiefs. (Sec. 19, 66-LSVI, TLL)
>
> The War Chiefs shall then divest the erring Chief of his title by order of the women in whom the titleship is vested. When the Chief is deposed the

[13] Originally the Confederacy only had five Nations, but the Tuscarora Tribe joined in 1724 but have no political voting power.

> women shall notify the Confederacy Chiefs through their War Chief and the Confederate Chiefs shall sanction the act. The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the Chiefs shall elect him. Then shall the chosen one be installed by the Installation Ceremony (Sec. 19, 123-XLI, EUC) (Cf. DA-XLII). (Council of the Great Peace)

Indian Act 1876, Sec. 72: This section allowed the Superintendent-General the power to stop annuity and interest payments to any Indian who deserted his family, and the payments of the deserted wife and children. He could also stop the payments to any woman who did not have children and left her husband and lived with another man. This enforced the Christian ideals of marriage (Canada, "Excerpts from the Indian Act, 1876" 505).

1895 Amendment to the Indian Act, Sec. 114: This prohibited the Plains traditions of gift giving for ceremonies in an attempt to instil in them capitalist ideals of hoarding and accumulation of wealth. It also prohibited any ceremonies which involved the mutilation of a human body (Sun Dance, placing a dead body on platforms for animals to eat instead of burying the body in the ground) (Canada. "Indian Act Amendments" 510).

1914 Amendment to the Indian Act, Sec. 149: This section relates somewhat to Sec. 72 of the 1876 Act because it prohibited people leaving their own reserve to work in an exhibition as an "Indian," and made it illegal to wear Indian clothing outside their reserve without the consent of the Superintendent General, or to employ an Indian dressed as an Indian. This was in reference to men leaving to find work in the Calgary Stampede, and other such western shows. The ability for men to provide for their family was made impossible under the *Act* (Canada. "Indian Act Amendments" 510).

1920 Amendment the Indian Act Sec.2: Changes to the authority of the Band councils and their ability to decide whether a woman would continue to get her annuity payments or a lump sum if she married a non-Indian was placed in the authority of the Deputy Superintendent General. Prior to 1920, many Councils allowed women their annuity payments after such a marriage to retain communal ties (Canada, *RCAP* 29). D.S.G. Duncan Campbell Scott:

> When an Indian woman marries outside the band, whether a non-treaty Indian or a white man, it is in the interest of the Department, and in her interest as well, to sever her connection wholly with the reserve and the Indian mode of life, and the purpose of this section was to enable us to commute her financial interests. The words "with the consent of the band" have in many cases been effectual in preventing this severance... The amendment makes in the same directions as the proposed Enfranchisement Clauses, that is it takes away the power from unprogressive bands of preventing their members from advancing to full citizenship. (NAC RG10, Vol. 6810, file 470-2-3, vol.7) (Leslie and Maguire 55)

The Indian Act, S.C. 1951 subsec.11: The criteria for *registration* as an Indian followed the male line of descent. Only individuals "entitled to be registered" as Indian under the new Act would be federally recognized.

The Indian Act 1951, S.C. 1951 Sec. 12: A child whose mother or grandmother had obtained status through marriage to a man with Indian Status would lose their status at the age of twenty-one. This dealt with non-Native women gaining status under the 1876 Act.

After two generations, any children of such marriages would no longer be considered "Indians" based on their blood quantum (Canada, *RCAP* 30).

The Indian Act 1951, S.C. 1951 Sec. 12(1)(b) and *Sec.108(2)*: An Indian woman who married out would lose her status under Sec.12, but then could be enfranchised under Sec.108 against her will by the Minister's department. Enfranchisement would erase any records of the woman and her children ever being on the Indian Registry, by-passing the two-generation assumption of blood quantum (Canada, *RCAP* 30).

Leading up to the passing of Bill C-31 was the 1973 Supreme Court of Canada decision that the *Indian Act* Indian Registry rules would remain for women, despite the *Canadian Bill of Rights*. *Canada Act 1982* incorporated the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Section 15 of the *Charter* came into effect in 1985: "every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability." This legislation finally compelled the government to address the discriminatory sections in the *Indian Act*.

Bill C-31 was passed in 1985 and amended sections of the *Indian Act* which dealt with the Indian Registry, and Band membership. Indian status was also given back to individuals (both men and women) who had lost it due to Sec.12 or enfranchisement. The Bill also gave control of Band membership back to the Band councils, but left control of the category of Status Indian in the hands of the government. Band councils were however required under the amended *Indian Act 1985 Sec.10(4)* to include in their initial membership lists those who had been reinstated under Bill C-31, and to protect women and their

children who had gained status through marriage prior to 1985 (Canada, *RCAP* 34). Bill C-31 created categories of Indians within Sec. 6(1) and 6(2). A 6(1) Indian is an individual who had Status prior to 1985, or was a first-generation person who lost their Status through marriage, higher education, enfranchisement or military service. A 6(2) Indian is an individual who had one parent that would be considered a 6(1) Indian. Generally they were the children of marriages where the women married a non-Status man. But because of the membership control and marriages prior to 1985 between Native men and non-Native women, Bill C-31 in many ways, created more problems than it solved. For the following example 6(3), is a non-Indian.

1. 6(1) + 6(1) = 6(1): A Status Indian marries a Status Indian
2. 6(1) + 6(2) = 6(1): A Status Indian marries a 2nd generation re-instated Indian
3. 6(2) + 6(2) = 6(1): A 2nd generation Indian marries a 2nd generation Indian
4. 6(1) + 6(3) = 6(2): A Status Indian marries a Métis
5. 6(2) + 6(3) = 6(3): A 2nd generation Indian marries a Métis

If a woman reinstated as a Status Indian 6(2) (the child of a Status 6(1) mother married to a Métis or non-Status Indian[14]) marries a Métis man, their children will have no Indian Status despite their Aboriginal lineage. If a woman with Status 6(1) marries a white man, their children will have Indian Status 6(2). This categorization by the government has been internalized by many Aboriginal people as a guide to measure how "Indian" they are.

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[14] The category of non-Status Indian referred to individuals who were missed during the original Indian Registry and their descendants. In many cases, these were Bands of people on hunting trips, or who the surveyor never got to. There is no recognized test to prove the legitimacy of someone's claim as non-Status individual.

As confusing as the Bill C-31's Sec.6 category is, the *1982 Canada Act Sec.35(2)* which gave Federal recognition to the Métis as one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, but gave no guidelines as to who the Métis were, has caused additional problems. Historically, Métis were children from unions of Cree, Ojibwa and Saulteaux (Plains Ojibwa) women and French or Scottish fur traders. Métis (from the Latin "*miscere*," to mix) was first used for children of Native women and French men. Other children from such unions between Native women and fur traders of Scandinavian, English, Irish and Scottish origin were called "Country-born," "Half-breeds" and "Black-Scots" (MNA 2006). According the Métis National Council, anyone who self-identifies as Métis, is of historic Métis Ancestry (as just mentioned), is distinct from those Aboriginal people mentioned in Sec. 35(2), and is accepted by the Métis Nation, is Métis. The Métis traditional homeland that one must trace one's lineage to is in "west central North-America" (MNC 2006).

Prior to 1982, Métis women felt the right to speak as women from a unique culture with a specific history rooted in the formation of Canada. After 1982, Métis women felt the right to speak as Aboriginal women because the Federal powers recognized and affirmed their existence as Aboriginal Canadians. Prior to the *Canada Act 1982 Sec. 35(2)* and Bill C-31 [1985] (when many "Métis" women were reinstated under the *Indian Act)*, there was a definite separation of cultures and histories between the Métis and First Nations.[15]

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[15] It is widely accepted that Catholicism or other branches of Christianity is the predominant religion of the Métis because of their origin as a Nation with European fatherhood. The use of Native medicines or language is not considered an expression of their religion, but elements of their culture.

Maria Campbell in *Halfbreed* debates early in her novel about who the Métis are. "Indians were very passive... Halfbreeds were quick-tempered" (26). When her *Môsom*[16], the Chief at the time, did not speak when the Indian Agent appeared, Campbell questions him, "You're the Chief. How come you don't talk?" Her *Kôhkom*[17] looked at her *Môsom* and stated, "It's the white in her" (27). Later, according to Campbell's *Cheechum*, people from the Montreal Lake First Nation "were the descendants of the first Hudson Bay Scots to come to our North and... were more Halfbreed than we were" (41).

The First Nations' understanding of who the Métis are is often the historic understanding of people born from a union of a Native woman and a white man, and exists to this day, though the Métis Nation *today* would challenge this. An individual could have Status under Bill C-31, but be a *Halfbreed* to a 6(1). In Indigenous terms, Indian Status may have been given to an individual under Federal legislation, but the cultural connections and understandings weren't. ""How can I be Métis if I do not have one single living Métis relative, at least to my knowledge?" I asked. She finished by saying that I would need to be, "a bit more brown, a bit more cultured to be Nish.[18]"" (Fullerton 24).

Kim Anderson in her book, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, describes herself as a Cree/Métis. Her mother is a white from an upper-middleclass family in Vancouver. Her father's parents were of mixed Cree and Scottish ancestry, and he was from a working-class background in Portage la Prairie. Anderson's parents met while working in Ghana, married and then raised Anderson and her brother in a white middle-

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[16] Grandfather
[17] Grandmother
[18] *Anishinabe*: Ojibwa

class neighbourhood outside Ottawa. She describes how she struggled with her own Native identity because she did not grow up amongst Aboriginal people (24). Within her work there are references to Aboriginal women as *they*, and at other times *us*, including herself. She states:

> The more I listened, the more distressed I felt about the abuses *they*[19] had endured. I felt particularly disturbed by the indifferent tone which one woman used to describe an act of sexual abuse that her husband had inflicted on her in the presence of their children a few days prior to our interview. To me, it was a wake-up call about the indifference with which we treat abuses against women and children in general. It made me think about the loss of balance *we* have experienced in our families, communities and nations, and how this is linked to our gender relations. (14) [*Emphasis added*]

Though few First Nations women would directly take issue with Anderson, her book portrays to non-Native people ideas and issues many First Nations women would not discuss outside their own families or their communities, and this was probably the point. Anderson has referenced the work of many First Nations women scholars, and interviewed Traditional women, but at times the messages of these women gets lost in Anderson's identity issues. Aboriginal feminism is not an issue for Traditional women until women claiming Aboriginality speak openly on their behalf or about them, without a common history--separate from the Federal categories of "Aboriginal."

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[19] It is not clear in Anderson's text of whether *they* are the particular woman's family, or Aboriginal women.

Tracey Lindberg, who also identifies as Cree/Métis asserts that sisterhood is shared knowledge and experiences, common understandings of mothering with residential schools being part of the extended family history. She disagrees with putting gender issues above spirituality, race and culture. To her, being a woman does not unite her with all women in the bonds of sisterhood, rather her sisters are women who experience the same cultural histories, fears and challenges. "The same weariness on the face of one just like us who has also run herself ragged by cooking for her third funeral in two weeks. These women are my sisters" (343).

The likelihood of the woman Anderson described as being "indifferent" while describing the sexual abuse by her husband, was in part because Anderson, as an Aboriginal woman, would understand what she was going through.

> Like too many other Aboriginal people I have been a victim. I was a victim of child sexual abuse, of a battering relationship, of rape. In the First Nations women's community that does not make me special. In a way it makes me "usual." That is a sad comment. I can tell you the name of only one Aboriginal woman in this country that I know for sure has not survived incest, child sexual abuse, rape or battering... The violence that Aboriginal women face is not experienced as single incidents. It is cyclical. All too often, violence describes most of our lives. Even when we manage to create a safe environment in which to live our individual lives, the violence still surrounds us. Our friends, sisters, aunties and nieces still suffer. The violence is inescapable. (Monture-Angus, 69)

The fact that Anderson did not experience what most Aboriginal people experience does not discount her heritage, but it does separate her and others like her from the commonality felt amongst many Aboriginal people, that of victimization and survival.

The right for some "Aboriginal" women to speak as a representative of Aboriginal women gets questionable when the legislation which originally labelled and separated Nations, now legally unites separated Peoples; and the importance of the larger issues becomes an indication of an individual's living history. The emphasis on gender issues or cultural/race issues is often the divider amongst Aboriginal women.

> We can talk about self-government, sovereignty, cultural recovery and the healing path, but we will never achieve any of these things until we take a serious look at the disrespect that characterizes the lives of so many Native women. We must have a vision for something better, because our future depends on it. (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 14)

Agnes Grant, a white woman and professor of Native Studies concludes after many years teaching and living amongst First Nations that "Female power" is not a gender issue, but basic and essential to the humanity within all people (Grant 57).

First Nations Culture and Religions

The colonization of Canada has had impacts on individual Nations, and the ability to differentiate cultures has become difficult even for Aboriginal peoples. The view and treatment of women within each culture has had so little documentation by early anthropologists and missionaries that broad generalizations have been made, and any information gathered has been incorrectly applied to all Nations. The mistake of modern-

day Indigenous Studies scholars and feminists is to take pieces of narrative without the cultural understanding to make their point. In the article "The Traditional Roles of Native Women in Canada and the Impact of Colonization," by Somer Brodribb, Chipewyan customs were discussed. She records the accounts of explorer Samuel Hearne in 1770 and states that his observations of Native society provide valuable accounts of the role and status of the Native women. Hearne recorded the comments of his guide about the importance of women on expeditions:

> Women, added he, were made for labour; one of them can carry or haul, as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents, make and mend out clothing, keep us warm at night; and, in fact, there is no such thing as travelling any considerable distance, or for any length of time, in this country, without their assistance. Women, said he again, though they do everything, are maintained at a trifling expense; for us they always stand cook, the very licking of their fingers in scarce times, is sufficient for the subsistence. (qtd. in Brodribb 88)

Brodribb then writes of Hearne's guide beating one of his eight wives when she protested another wife being acquired. The wife eventually died of the beating. "Further research is required to determine whether such treatment of women was an intrinsic part of this society or a result of economic distress and social breakdown" (Brodribb 89). The Chipewyan, as Henry S. Sharp points out in "Asymmetric Equals: Women and Men Among the Chipewyan," have had the reputation as being particularly ruthless with their treatment of Chipewyan women.

These issues are particularly appropriate in considering the Chipewyan precisely because Chipewyan culture has such an established reputation for male dominance and the abuse of women. The Chipewyan are not significant in the English-speaking North Americans' debate of gender issues, but they do play a role as exemplars of the negative side of Aboriginal Native American life. Within the anthropological literature they have been cited specifically for the mistreatment of women, and, along with Northern Athapaskans in general, their cultures are often perceived in largely negative terms as marginal, weak, and vanishing. This tendency has been noted and commented on by specialists (Sharp 49).

Sharp clarifies that Samuel Hearn's observations did not indicate he understood the Chipewyan man's need for women's labour. This dependence on women defined their power, an idea not previously considered. Hearne's accounts were recorded with his own "cultural baggage and biases" (56) and he was not involved in the everyday life of the Chipewyan people, only the hunting/trapping excursions. Sharp also states that the women described in Hearne's writings were women he was "most familiar with, those in or subject to the company of bands of traders roaming over thousands of miles, would be the women most removed from the normal protection of ordinary social life and the ones most vulnerable to abuse, domination, and low valuation" (57). Sharp concludes that a culture cannot be viewed through a gender-dominance perspective, and for a clearer understanding a focus on gender complementary acts is a better indication of how a society views its women.

The inability for scholars, and noted Aboriginal women scholars, to portray Nations as unique and separate is a direct reflection of the distance between western and Aboriginal religious thought. Aboriginal religions are linked intrinsically to the land they traditionally occupy, and the relationship and responsibilities the People have to their Nation and each other, as Inés Talamantaz has pointed out. But because of the displacement of so many Indigenous peoples, connection to a Nation has proved difficult for some. This separation from a Nation's cultural customs and beliefs, sometimes felt by multiple generations, has meant the loss of cultural knowledge and syncretism with other Peoples' beliefs. This syncretism or borrowing is nothing new to the Americas before or after the arrival of Europeans as shown by the Cree in Canada and the U.S.

> In the process of nation building, they explored new lands and engaged in extensive trade with the Aboriginal neighbors. Quick to adapt to new experiences, they took from other cultures what was useful in their own lives and ignored the rest... Two important facets of Cree life should be noted: the vast expanse of land that they have occupied historically and occupy at present; and the various cultural subdivisions that have emerged through time. Over the years, the Crees, originally an Eastern Woodlands people (the James Bay Crees) have spread out, becoming in turn, a Western Woodlands people (the Swampy Crees) a Parklands people (the Woods Crees), and a people with a Plains way of life (the Plains Crees). (Shore 139, 140)

When one is asked what the unifying factor is for the Cree, there isn't a ritual or ceremony that is common to all of them. The *only* unifying trait is the view of women and

their involvement in ceremonies, or handling culturally important objects during their moon-time. In some instances, women are barred completely from certain ceremonies such as the conjuring tent for the James Bay Cree (Preston, 2002: 98). This belief in women's uniqueness[20] during their "time" is common to not only the Algonquin Nations (Brown 10) of the Great Lakes and onto the Plains (ie. Blackfoot, Saulteaux, Ojibwa proper, Innu, Cree), but other groups such as the Plateau peoples[21], Navajo (Shepardson 163), the Pomo of California (Patterson 134), or the Paiute (Knack150). Observance of menstrual taboos usually revolved around hunting practices and the tools men used for hunting. These could include such things as spears or drums, even entire hunting areas. There was an understanding throughout the Americas that women had observances they needed to adhere to for the safety, security and health of their tribes. The traditional societies and observances are no longer relevant because they are no longer living as traditional societies. This is the argument that modern women are using to justify their adoption of sexually equal activities whether it be wanting to be a Pledger in a Sun Dance or using drums.

In 2001, The Sweetgrass Road Drum Group from Winnipeg took the St. Thomas Powwow committee of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota to court for not allowing the all-female drum group participation in the annual Powwow. The complaint was filed under discrimination in an educational institution because the Powwow was being held in St. Thomas, a Catholic college. The complaint was answered with a motion by the University to have the case dismissed based on the U.S. first Amendment, free speech and

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[20] Meaning either powerful, dangerous or having the ability to "spoil" ceremonies.
[21] Cultures between the mountain ranges of the Rocky Mountains, Cascade Mountains, Blue Mountains and the Great Bend of the Fraser River: eastern Washington, northern Idaho, segments of eastern Oregon, into Montana and southern British Columbia (Ackerman 75).

freedom of religion (Stinson 2). The case caused controversy across both countries and brought the idea of sexual discrimination within Aboriginal traditions to the courts by Aboriginal women for the first time. Raven Hart-Bellecourt believed Aboriginal culture isn't set,

> I think a lot of people are ignorant. What we need today is not what was needed then. I think this is a clear case of discrimination because if it was tradition, what is a non-Aboriginal doing running the powwow and non-Aboriginal dancers wearing eagle feathers. It's okay to dance for money, but it's not okay for you to sing because you're a woman? I don't see it having anything to do with tradition. It's ignorance. (Stinson 2)

Though Hart-Bellecourt focussed on the singing, the people who would not let the drum group participate were not opposed to the women singing, rather them playing the drum which was understood to be a cultural taboo. Executive Vice-President of St. Thomas, Dr. Judith Dwyer, explained the cancellation of the University's powwow for the following year (University of St. Thomas).

> ...Because we are unwilling to sponsor an event that is inconsistent with the traditions and sacred beliefs held by members of the Powwow Committee and the broader American Indian community. That women cannot play the drum is a long-standing tradition for American Indians. The University supports the right of American Indians to follow their traditions. (University of St. Thomas)

The six-member drum group eventually dropped their complaint against the University, and the case was dismissed with prejudice.[22] The drum-group claimed the decision was reached because they filed the complaint in order to be allowed to participate, but since the University cancelled the next year's powwow, their participation would never be permissible (University of St. Thomas). The personal experiences of Aboriginal women and their understanding of their cultural backgrounds are often in conflict in modern times. Hart-Bellecourt's father Vernon Bellecourt stated that he raised his daughter "to fight back if she feels it's wrong" (Stinson 2). Vernon Bellecourt has been given credit for founding the American Indian Movement (University of St. Thomas) otherwise known as AIM, which has had its own complaints of not understanding the traditions they were representing. Kathleen Smith,[23] present during the AIM protest at Wounded Knee, explains her experiences with the men of AIM.

> The AIM leaders are particularly sexist, never having learned our true Indian history where women voted and participated equally in all matters of tribal life. They have learned the white man's way of talking down to women and regarding their position as inferior. Some... actually don't believe women can fight or think, and gave us the impression that we were there for their use and that we should be flattered to have their children. One man said he was helping Indian unity by having a girlfriend from every tribe. They want to

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[22] The women can never take the University to court again on the issue of drumming at the annual powwow.

[23] Smith was originally quoted in Beatrice Medicine's *The Native American Woman: A Perspective.*

keep women divided and fighting for the men's friendship and attention. (Tsosie 577)

Vernon Bellecourt's belief that his daughter should fight for her own personal beliefs rather than supporting the beliefs of the traditions she is representing appears to be contrary to understood cultural norms. But as Smith demonstrates, this may be an extension of a more western worldly view.

There is no doubt that the negative treatment of women within Aboriginal communities is alarming; that is not debateable. The function of women within their communities, which they have maintained, is not under scrutiny. However, for some Aboriginal women the sexist views of their male counterparts is reason enough to suggest an overhaul of their cultures, or a modern reconstruction. Like the Sweetgrass Road Drum Group, other women who have started drumming at cultural gatherings are encountering opposition by both men and women. The reason for women drumming now or not being able to drum has various arguments for and against.

Women from Winnipeg and Grassy Narrow who gathered to sing and drum believe "the practice of women singing and drumming was lost for many decades, like many Native traditions, due to colonization" (Muldrew 35). Aboriginal artist Lida Fontaine struggled with the reason women don't drum. She formed her conception of tribal feminism from reading Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition*, and understood Gunn's point of approaching feminism through a culture lens, but decided to look at her own culture through a feminist lens. She has interpreted the tradition of not allowing women to drum or sit directly around a drum as subtle patriarchy. For her,

if most Indigenous societies were matriarchal, European patriarchy has been learned by First Nations and as a result, "gender rules also shifted ceremonial protocol" (Deerchild 102). As an artist, Fontaine's response was to put a large drum on display with four pictures of women's naked breasts hanging by it. This was to protest the view that the sacred drum must be kept clean at all times and not associating it with sexuality. Fontaine maintains that patriarchy and residential school experiences has made sexuality shameful for many people, her artistic expression is "her struggle to fit "that's the way it's always been done" into a contemporary structure where women supposedly can do anything men can do" (Deerchild104).

Other women view male Elders' criticisms of women not behaving as they deem appropriate in cultural settings as offensive.

> Throughout the weekend, I heard male Elders chastise women for not wearing skirts or for not respecting feathers on their regalia and dispensing assorted other "teachings" on "appropriate" behaviour. The irony of all this was that the theme of the gather was "Honouring Women." (Amadahy 149)

According to Zainab Amadahy in her article "The Healing Power of Women's Voices," the power of a drum has healing capabilities, and notes individuals who have turned their lives around because they started drumming. Amadahy believes that drumming is a "powerful medicine tool," and therefore both men and women should have access to it (149). She cannot understand why "women shouldn't drum in their moon time. Yet they say women are very powerful at that time. So there's a bit of a conflict there" (150).

Bonita Lawrence commented on the menstrual taboos in Anderson's *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood.* While attending a feast in which she was supposed to sing with other women, she was not allowed to join the women but had to sing from the doorway. When it came time to eat, she and another woman sat on the floor of the stairwell to eat their meals.

> I remember the woman I was with didn't see this as a problem. She instructed me, kind of importantly, "Now the women have to bring us food." I felt like saying, "You're being a fool to think this is an empowering thing for us to do, as women, to be sitting here in the stairwell outside the feast. And why is it women have to bring us the food—so there's another bloody job for the women to do? Why the hell can't the men bring us the food?" Nobody could see us there, or talk to us…one guy said to me, "I didn't see you inside How are you doing?" and he started talking to me. I couldn't say anything. "Why didn't you come in?" he asked. I thought, *"He doesn't know I am on my period. There is nothing traditional or sacred about us being out here in the stairwell on our period. To them, we just didn't want to join them. And whatever happened in there, we were not part of it."* (266)

For these women, Aboriginal culture is a part of who they are, but who they are within their culture needs to change. Métis scholar Emma Larocque believes culture and traditions will not always be relevant in modern times. Women have had to change with the times, making difficult choices along the way. "…[W]e are challenged to change, create, and

embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards" (Larocque 14).

This issue of Aboriginal women applying human rights legislation or "equality before the law" to define a new position of who they are within their culture is troubling to those who blame colonial legislation for the problems within their communities. It was because of legislation that women were separated from their communities, not considered *Indians* after marriage to a non-Indian, and the reason the Sun Dance and Potlatch ceremonies were prohibited. Using these same tactics for one's own agenda against their cultures is not acceptable. Author and historian Ed McGaa (Eagle Man: Oglala Sioux) states:

> Balance. Start with balance or forget about it. Northern Native American people did not need a written bible and had none. Their great mysteries were found in their natural surroundings for thousands of years. In other words, they observed Creator's creation for their spiritual, religious guidance. They formulated their beliefs from what they directly observed...(sic) if you want to claim yourself as Indian traditionalists, as Northern Indians, you do not pick up a man-written book and put it before the Creator's nature. (Stinson 18)

In 1974 the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) was formed and represented Native, Métis and Inuit women. This organization framed the fundamental differences between mainstream feminism and Aboriginal feminism. NWAC did not strive for equality between the sexes and accepted there were cultural roles for men and women (Ouellette 31). However NWAC maintains that male dominance now entrenched in Native

politics is the reason Aboriginal women do not have a remedy to address sexism and violence, therefore modern human rights laws are needed. In opposition to that opinion are Patricia Monture-Angus (law professor) and Mary Ellen Turpel (lawyer),[24] who maintain that it was Canadian legislation that entrenched these discrepancies and that "only through "traditional" gender, social, and legal practices" will change occur in First Nations communities (Ouellette 23).

The dilemma with questioning certain cultural practices without the cultural context or understanding is inappropriate. Canada's unique legislative history and categorization of people has created unique identity issues. Under the category of Métis, one could be as little as 1/8 Native, and still claim to be an Aboriginal. If an individual claiming to be 1/8 German decided to comment on how Hutterite colonies operate after joining one in adulthood, what they contested would not be considered legitimate. An extreme example, but one which illustrates the complexity of Nationhood, Tradition and heritage for "Aboriginal" people.

Cultures have always changed, borrowed from other people they come into contact with, or been forced to adopt other's beliefs and practices. There are usually elements that remain of the old traditions present in the newly formed culture. The issue with Aboriginal women who adopt western feminism is not that they are picking and choosing from various Aboriginal cultures to form new world views. It is the denial of crucial fundamental beliefs and customs related to women practiced by *all* the cultures they are borrowing from.

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[24] Monture-Angus and Turpel are noted Aboriginal educators and writers within Aboriginal rights and Canadian law.

The denial of menstrual taboos and the distinction that women have certain roles within their particular culture constitutes Pan-Indianism. Pan-Indianism lacks the social structure to exercise its new identity and in some cases already demonstrated, uses Canadian legislation to interpret how the *new* Pan-Indian culture will be accepted by First Nations still functioning within the traditions of the *old* culture. In some cases, legislation is used to force the acceptance and right to express the new culture amongst in the old.

Chapter 3

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF CEREMONIES AND CONTEMPORARY REACTION TO FEMINIST AGITATION

Traditional Aboriginal women in contemporary times, as well as in the past, did not think of themselves as sacred. It is only recently that recognition has been given to women as a whole for the continuation of Aboriginal people surviving with their cultures intact. Describing women as *sacred* by modern feminist scholars or equal to the Creator is somewhat out of context with how Aboriginal people have lived their lives. Plains Cree women continue to operate within sacred circles as they have always done: as a necessary part of their society. Women do not arrogantly regard men as lesser beings. When one gender assumes a primary or superior position in a society, it is unbalanced, as feminists have pointed out. By the same notion, trying to elevate women to a position of other-worldly importance and connecting this to Tradition will have the same effect. Cooperation and balance are fundamentals traditionalists have tried to manage.

How women in modern times have tried to use Tradition while still maintaining the values of independent thought, individuality and feminist ideals is not understood by Elder Aboriginal women of past generations. There is a misunderstanding between these women that extends beyond the change in the times. Without having a cultural method in place for communication and cultural guidance, many modern Aboriginal women are no longer consulting the Elder women from their communities. The result has been frustration on both parts: not valuing what is the foundation of the culture(s) and what has allowed the People

to survive; and blindness to the social dysfunction that exists every day in Aboriginal communities that Tradition won't fix.

Texts of the past contain little information about how women viewed themselves within their Nation, or what they believed their roles were. There are only glimpses from early narratives that even give women a voice. In most cases, it was the Native men or missionaries who described the role and value of the women in that culture. Without the cultural context, or an insider's understanding of the culture, it is almost impossible to derive any conclusions or make generalizations. The challenge is to take the modern narratives by Aboriginal women who are living within Canada and construe what has been internalized as Traditional. In Diane Meili's *Those Who Know: Profiles of Alberta's Native Elders*, Abbie Burnstick of the Paul Band describes the traditional values she lives by including the treatment of all people as equal, withholding judgement.

> A woman came to see me. She was drunk and I let her in. After, another woman said to me, 'I don't know why you're so good to the people. Didn't you smell that woman? She was smelly. You shook hands with her and gave her a meal.' I said, 'No, I gave her what I had to give.' I can't reject anybody.[25]

Abbie combines the traditions she was raised with and Christianity, though believes a difference exists between Native religion and Christianity. She states, "They say you can't serve two Gods, but I just reject Satan and all his demons. I believe in God alone… The sweatlodge – that's some people's way. Church – it's another way." Though it is apparent that syncretism works well for Mrs. Burnstick, and many others, she demonstrates the

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[25] This book does not list page numbers.

difficulty in distinguishing what is traditional, cultural or religious. Just as mainstream Canada has done, there is now a separation between cultural practices and religious beliefs. One of the main differences is how women in a Traditional sense view themselves, and how Aboriginal women who practice Christianity view themselves.

> ...Abbie wonders why she is often asked to officiate at gatherings and say prayers, "[W]hen I'm just a woman. There are lots of elders, lots of men, and they could do it. Maybe God wants me to do it. He works through me." Abbie's recognition of the traditional woman's place in Native society "behind the man" belies more liberal views she cherished as a young woman, considering she was one of the first women from Samson Reserve to travel and wear pants in the 1930's. (Meili)

As a young reader of Meili's work, how would a young Aboriginal individual decide what was a cultural belief? As discussed previously, wearing a skirt is important to some Aboriginal women, and not wearing one considered liberal by the Métis author, Ms. Meili. Is it traditional to be "behind the man" because women are lesser or because "it is the man's responsibility to protect his wife because she is the giver of life and more powerful than he" (Voyageur 98)? Or is it a cultural point that men should break a path for women and children? In public, then, the way they walk is expressive of a caring family unit. There may be many differing opinions on this issue, a case in point of the varying opinions on all outwardly cultural aspects of Indigenous peoples.

Applying traditional understandings and protocol to modern traditional ceremonies and gatherings is difficult as not everyone present will have the same cultural background

as was once common. There are no mechanisms such as a holy text to authenticate what is being told by each individual and the humility intrinsically woven throughout most Indigenous cultures, including Plains Cree, of not judging others or questioning an individual's personal experiences has resulted in many distortions or accounts that are not the actually the experiences of the person describing them (ie. Grey Owl and Longlance).

Each time Elder Henry Felix has been the Pledger or participant in a Sun Dance, the way the Sun Dance is performed is always according to the Elder who is advising him.[26] There have been constant additions or alternative methods adopted or dropped within the Sun Dance ceremony, but those are minute and do not alter the methods and understandings of the Sun Dance. For example, the Head Man would decide whether women are allowed to follow behind the *Okimawatik* or center pole once it has been chosen and brought into the camp, or if they must go into their tents and not look at it until it has been positioned upright. In another case, when the "Backwards people"[27] would arrive in the lodge, or whether they would be a part of the Sun Dance at all. These little adjustments would not alter the duration, or procedures done to begin and end a Plains Cree Sun Dance.

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[26] For a Sun Dance Pledger, the Elder or Head Man advises the Pledger and is the Elder who will instruct him of when to do each aspect of the Sun Dance ceremony, or decide at what point in the Sun Dance children will received their traditional names, when special prayers will be performed for non-participants, or the length of time the participants will dance.

[27] In Cree these people are also referred to as "Clowns" but their role is to perform their arrival and departure in the opposite of what is normally done: entering the Lodge walking backwards, and circle the Lodge in a counter-clockwise way. Their role is to take the negative feelings, energies and the like from the dancers and other participants, then to do the same around the camp. The "Clowns" are considered funny, but are performing a vital role, *expecting* gifts, which if each participant and individual camp do not have for them, they may help themselves to. This custom is Siouan (H. Felix), but has been adopted by other Sun Dance tribes. Joseph Dion, in My *Tribe the Crees*, refers to them as Cannibal or *Witigo* Dancers (46).

Aboriginal people have responded to the decline in knowledge about their cultural traditions by adopting a Pan-Indian approach that does not enforce any strict adherences and does not require them to delve deeply into any one tradition. This isn't strictly the practice of urban Aboriginals, grassroots communities are also losing many traditions and replacing them with psychological precepts rather than religious practices. One such example is the nationwide acceptance of the Medicine Wheel or Medicine Wheel teachings. When Mr. Felix was informed that one of the band members had gotten their "Medicine Wheel" teaching certificate, he wasn't sure what that meant. He was asked whether or not the individual with the certificate should do a teaching on the Medicine Wheel at the Elder's Gathering Mr. Felix was facilitating. He stated:

> The Medicine Wheel came from the Sioux. That's another aspect that we have to consider, when talking to the Elders, how comfortable are they in discussing the Medicine Wheel. It's another culture. The Medicine Wheels comes from the Sun Dance in the Sioux custom where they make a Medicine Wheel in the four days that they're fasting. These people [Cree Elders] are going to be very uncomfortable with the Medicine Wheel. (Felix, Henry)

He was not familiar with the New Age type of teachings being offered through workshops. In Ouellette's *The Fourth World*, she states that most Aboriginal people have a Four Races, Four Directions philosophy. She quotes Alice Williams from "The Spirit of My Quilts":

> The four directions, North, East, South and West, are represented respectively by the colours white, red, yellow and blue. Within these colours are the four races of Man: the Whiteman, the Red Man, the Yellow Race, and

> the Black Race; the four Life-givers: air, food, sun, and water; the four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall; the four vices: greed, apathy, jealousy, and resentment; the four moral principles: caring, vision, patience, and reasoning. (Ouellette 47)

Ouellette continues that the Medicine Wheel or *Circle of Life* "represents the underlying philosophy Aboriginal people have of the world around them" (48) with variations but ultimately the same world view. NWAC adopted their own Circle of Life philosophy and maintain they operate by their "grandmother's lodge" (51). The lodge represents the organization and the regions of Canada are the four directions, and each region within the organization collectively promotes their ancestral laws, and the belief in a single being as the Creator and giver of their spiritual beliefs, language and culture(s).

This philosophy is a new construct and at this time is not endorsed by Elders of any community. They cannot, because it is not anything they have known or been taught. The four races of people has been part of modern Aboriginal people's mythology; however it is a recent urban "myth." There has yet to be any northern Indigenous culture that has an oral history in which Asian, European and African people unite on this continent with the "Red" people. It has been suggested that this has more to do with colonization and the cultures that were needed for its success: the White man needed the Red man's land, the Black man was needed to clear the land and the Yellow man was needed the build railroads to cross the land.

When Aboriginal people who have not been raised with any one tradition but are familiar with overall concepts they believe are universal, it makes participation and

connecting with other participants difficult in a sacred ceremony. During participation in a June 2003 Sun Dance, *Junior*[28] Elder Wilma Schreder was asked why she didn't advise a young woman about the protocols for participation at a Sun Dance.

The young woman had decided to participate on the second full day of dancing and situated herself amongst the extended family of the Pledger. Elder Schreder was acting as the Pledger's female lead.[29] In this position, she had the role of enforcing the protocols amongst the women participating. The young woman needed an Eagle whistle (which she offered two cigarettes for), and then slept most of the time commenting from time to time on how strong the rest of the women were. She relayed a story to the women on either side of her about her participation in a 'traditional' fast in which she and her partner were only given juice for the four days, and "weren't looked after properly." Finally, mid-afternoon she informed the *ôskâhpeyôs*[30] that she had to drive to Winnipeg for a job interview and had to leave. She requested the Pledger to perform the prayers for her and hang her prints[31] which were brown, orange, black and red.[32]

Schreder noted that she should have said something as the head woman to the young woman about where she should have positioned herself, when she was expected to dance, the value of an Eagle whistle and waiting for an appropriate time to ask for her prayers, but adds:

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[28] Wilma Schreder refers to herself as a Junior Elder because she is still learning from older Elders.
[29] The Pledger's female lead, is normally his wife but that is not possible than it can be a woman chosen by the Pledger such as a sister or mother. The lead female is positioned next to the Pledger, though they are not in contact with each other. There is a barrier created between the men and women dancers so they do not see each other.
[30] Helper or server.
[31] Fabric of specific colors.
[32] Yellow, blue, green, red and white are customary for Plains Cree.

> Learning the ways of each ceremony takes a long time, even years. If women want to start doing their own thing with ceremonial rituals without consulting wisdom, then they will not be respected because they don't know. My role in that area is to provide guidance with what knowledge I can share, providing that there is a request in place for my input. There is so much to learn. (Schreder)

Before correcting anyone she says she must consider if they are from another First Nation or if they are just starting to learn the sacred ceremonies, in which case they will learn the proper ways to ask for guidance if they continue on the path have started on.

> Those who partake in ceremonial rituals just for show, just so they can say they have participated, are just getting a surface experience, it's not a deep understanding. If they haven't gone to an Elder, they haven't asked for advice or information, then they will not get anything out of it and they will walk away feeling empty. (Schreder)

While participating at a Sun Dance in June 2005, Sandra Felix commented to an Elderly woman that she was finding it difficult. The woman replied to her it was because there were women in the camp "in their time walking around too much." This woman believed that it was better for women in their time to stay out of sight or away completely, though the other participants acknowledged that women who were in their time performed other helpful duties such as cooking, or bringing items (non-ceremonial) to the camp that had been forgotten. It is doubtful that in earlier times, women in their time were kept out of

sight and likely that they had their own rites just beyond the camp circle, and were not excluded.

In modern times being a "runner" would not have been traditionally performed because the whole camp would have moved together, but having an additional cook would have been important. Sometimes women who are menstruating are allowed to fast on their own at home or in a lodge outside the boundary of the Sun Dance encampment, and then come to sit at the doorway of the Sun Dance lodge during the giveaway, and at the *conclusion* of a Sun Dance[33].

Trying to decide who to ask for cultural and ceremonial teachings is difficult if one isn't familiar with the appropriate cultural behaviour for an Elder; or who is an Elder in the Aboriginal tradition as opposed to someone who is a senior citizen. Métis author Maria Campbell cautions against treating Elders as high-ranking people, rather than individuals who have certain knowledge to pass on (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 267). Bonita Lawrence in Anderson's *A Recognition of Being* states:

> I think a slavish kind of obedience is a function of unfamiliarity too. When you come into a community as an adult, you learn the stereotype about "the wise Elder," which is then combined with the authority of the village priest. In our communities people are insecure about their knowledge of "tradition." So how do we evaluate the words of Elders when coming into a community

[33] The woman would be allowed near the Sun Dance Lodge after the final pipe ceremony, after the Spirits asked to attend have been thanked and sent away. Head Man at Henry Felix's Sun Dance 2001.

> as an adult and not knowing how to question teachings and authority in a deep way? (268)

Individuals who have stated they are "Elders" are most times in urban centres where many Aboriginal people have lost their traditions. These particular Elders come to represent a philosophy containing hidden knowledge, and power. The relationship that ensues is mutually beneficial for those seeking power and followers, and those seeking a deeper meaning to their lives. However, "to really learn traditional ways and incorporate them into a non-traditional setting is no small feat... not the least of which is involvement with "real Elders" in a "real" way, not for image or personal gain" (Stiegelbauer 40).

Henry Felix believes there are different kinds of Elders. Some have different understandings of what their role means, and personal identity becomes an important. Whether or not the Elder identifies with a particular family, clan or community is information the seeker needs to know. Mr. Felix believes the Elder needs to be questioned about how they identify themselves. Elders have a multitude of knowledge, but there are some who focus only on one thing, and others who are knowledgeable in many areas. "Confronting" them in order to find the right fit is necessary (Felix, Henry).

There are no mechanisms to determine who is a teacher to pass on traditional knowledge, and one who is seeking personal power. Of the Elders interviewed, those heard during public gatherings, and those interviewed in Meili's *Those Who Know*, the common thread amongst them is an understanding that they are not the holders of power; rather they are the keepers of knowledge for individuals who wish to know more about their cultural beliefs. Seeking physical or material wealth as a reason to follow traditional ways is

contradictory to what these Elders have been taught. The characteristics the Elders understood were of value to others were self-sacrifice, humility and the ability to provide for others. Women's roles of motherhood and being a grandmother were also highly valued.

From *Those Who Know*: Jimmy Meneen describes the best experience of his life as killing a moose. "If I killed a moose, than that was everything. It meant food. Being free in the bush and providing – everyone valued that." Mary Mae Strawberry was described as being extraordinary because "...she'd give away her last tea bag." Dorothy Smallboy raised twelve children and was willing to foster more if they needed a home and love. These beliefs of self-sacrifice were recorded by Mandelbaum as intrinsic to Plains Cree culture.

A leader or chief amongst the Plains Cree was often a hereditary position, however if he did not have the qualities needed, then another high ranking man could take his place. By virtue of merit, if that man had superior skills in battle, was an excellent hunter and was a great orator, then he could replace an incompetent hereditary chief. Above all, for the Plains Cree a leader would need to give freely of his possessions to the needy.

> When a young man showed (by his deeds) that he would be a chief some day the old men would go to see him and say, "Now young man, you are climbing higher and higher and are on the way to become a chief. It is for your own good [that we speak]. It is not an easy thing to be chief. Look at this chief now. He has to have pity on the poor. When he sees a man in difficulty he must try to help him in whatever way he can. If a person asks for something in his tipi, he must give it to him willingly and without any bad

> feeling. We are letting you know this now because you will meet these things and you must have a strong heart." (Mandelbaum 106)

The Chief's relatives and wife were also expected to be generous, to better his reputation. When returning from a successful hunt, the man's wife gave the best parts of the animal to those in need (Mandelbaum 107).

The cultural understandings of what is important in an Elder, and what is valued amongst the community have become distorted as Reserves have become welfare-states, substance abuse is high along with the lingering effects of residential schools. Plains Cree women who have had their childhoods controlled within residential schools often are confused as to what is traditional, and what is missionary influenced. There is a fine line between martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and for young women rebelling against patriarchy and sexism, there is no distinction. During his 2003 Sun Dance, Henry Felix was concerned over a young woman camped next to his camp while in her time. After a day of not being allowed to walk around freely and being expected to wear a skirt, she was overheard stating that the rule of skirt wearing, was in her opinion, a missionary-based rule and left the camp shortly after.

It is only within the structure of an actual functioning society that the distinction between martyrdom and self-sacrifice is evident. Giving to others for the glory to be had in the after-life is an intangible idea to many, leaving the receiver in debt to the giver—an unbalanced relationship. Giving to others in a merit-based society does not leave anyone beholden to another. In exchange for a gift or aid, the receiver gives their acknowledgement that the individual has the traits desirable in a leader. Inequality is a struggle for urban

Aboriginal communities as well as in grassroots communities[34] with their two-tiered economy.[35]

The *Indian Act* and its Chief and Council elections have also interfered with the merit-based system. It is debateable whether a functioning traditional society still exists anywhere. However, within the sacred ceremonies and the replication of what was performed by the merit-based societies of the past, is the ability for all people to be equal again through their own participation, self-sacrifice and gifting. During the ceremony's duration, equality between the wealthy and the poor is restored, and men's and women's traditional roles are respected and maintained.

Understanding that they are doing what their ancestors did in the past is an important connection for participants. Questioning of certain cultural practices and the relevance of them in modern times is disrespectful to those who understand how the act of the ceremony is a tribute to those who came before them, as well as the expression of spirituality and faith. Religious beliefs are often overlooked when critiquing Indigenous traditions (Smandych and Lee 36), with cultural expression being the focus rather than religious faith.

Elder Wilma Schreder describes how difficult it was for her during a 2003 Sun Dance in which a young woman blew her whistle at a different time than everyone else. She was attempting to duplicate how some of the men were blowing theirs. The men, who were blowing their whistles in a way mimicking certain birds, were from another tribe

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[34] Indian Reserves or Métis colonies – communities with almost an exclusive Aboriginal population.
[35] People who have one of the few Federally funded jobs, and those who are unemployed.

(Assiniboine) and were guests. The woman was finally corrected in a kind manner that did not embarrass her or make her feel unwelcome. Ms. Schreder offered tobacco to one of the *ôskâhpeyôs* to correct the woman's whistling because it was interfering with the other women. She was sensing weakness amongst the women and some were complaining of headaches. The *ôskâhpeyôs* brought an Elder to the woman asking him to "pray for his sister who is having trouble with her singing." In this manner, the woman understood that the way she was blowing her whistle was inappropriate, while at the same time removing any shame she may experience. However, the experience was upsetting to Ms. Schreder who had never participated or witnessed a Sun Dance in which a woman decided to do things her own way.

> People are told how to conduct themselves, but nobody listens. They have no spiritual life and they don't want to take responsibility for anything. You only look at yourself, not other people. I've never heard of anyone being banned or not accepted [in ceremonies]. Everyone is welcome. If women are doing something different, the Elders will tell them in a quiet way. No one else knows what they are being told. If their feelings are hurt and they don't come back, they don't come back. They aren't there to disrupt everyone else. (Schreder)

Indigenous religions do not make the distinction between male and female sacred experiences or the validity of them dependent on gender (Mandelbaum 145; Brown 78; Klein and Ackerman 15). Religious feminism's critique of western religions does not apply to Aboriginal beliefs. Religious feminism and its contestation with male-only experiences

being legitimate is not the case with Aboriginal beliefs. Aboriginal women with western feminist views argue that gender-specific roles shouldn't apply and tradition needs to change to accommodate women equally in all areas of Aboriginal spirituality. For this to occur two things need to happen; there needs to be a common understanding of what is meant by 'spirituality' and the second is the acceptance of change in women's roles by traditional women.

Amongst First Nations, the belief that the sacred originates from outside normal human understanding and experience is the norm. Joseph Epes Brown explains:

> The tradition in question must have its origins in a sacred source that is transcendent to the limits of the phenomenal world. All the expressions and extensions of this tradition will then bear the imprint of the sacred, manifested in terms appropriate to the time, place, and condition of humankind. The tradition provides the means, essentially through sacred rites, for contact with and ultimately a return to the transcendent Principle, Origin, or by whatever name this is called. (Brown 113)

If an individual changes an element of a ceremony created to express connection with what Brown calls the "transcendent Principle," they must prove they have been given the authority to do so. This must come from the culturally accepted methods of contact with the sacred. Mandelbaum describes an instance while observing a 1935 Plains Cree Sun Dance when one of two Pledgers erected two poles, one on the east side and one on the west side of the Sun Dance lodge which were approximately five feet tall. Atop each pole was an eagle feather. This had never been done before and the Pledger told everyone he had been

given the instructions to erect the poles in a vision. Several older men were not happy about the poles, but accepted them because the reasoning was from "supernatural suggestion" (Mandelbaum 197). However, the practice of erecting five-foot poles did not extend past that particular Sun Dance.

This understanding that sacred connection must come from the culturally accepted methods continues in modern times. For the Plains Cree, this is still in dreams, through fasting, Sun Dancing, in sweat lodges or through long-term illness or physical suffering. Along with the culturally accepted methods are the expectations that individuality will be subdued.

> ...Francis LaFlesche, an Omaha who became an ethnographer for the Bureau of American Ethnology. LaFlesche had been interviewing regarding a secret ritual, and was present when an elder expressed reproach to the informant. "No on can dispute your right to it away, but in doing so you should not make any changes in the ritual but give it in the same form as it has been handed down to us."[36] (Preston, 2002: 249-250)

Henry Felix calls this the "status quo" and believes humility is necessary to avoid further loss of ceremonies and the understanding of why they continue. The term "status quo" is how Mr. Felix describes the continuation of ceremonies, stories and rituals in a consistent way, without changes or alterations by individuals. The ceremonies need to remain intact as they were and as they were practiced by previous generations.

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[36] Quote in Preston's work taken from *The Osage Tribe*, by Francis LaFlesche. 45th Annual Report. Washington: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1930: 523-833.

Oral transmission of traditional beliefs has allowed many people to gain financially by being in the "Elder business," and there is good reason for the cautions of "Elder worship." Without the structure of traditional societies, there aren't the social peers who will ensure the accuracy of what an individual is saying about the beliefs and customs of their culture. In "Yokuts Narrative Style," by Anna H. Gayton, she discusses the qualities found in narratives, in oral traditions:

> 1. The style includes a presentation of specific persons and events in a personal context.
>
> 2. There is a precise replication of words and events, especially notable through the use of quoted words or quoted thoughts.
>
> 3. Credibility is judged partly on the degree to which a precisely detailed context is provided, and partly on the internal coherence of the whole context.
>
> 4. There is a varying but frequent omission of detail or explanation that is expected to be understood. Unity is achieved here by the assumption of shared understandings and by reciprocal participation of the listener... the listener is expected to know who is talking or acting, for it is apparently assumed that he is already familiar with the details of the story.[37] (qtd. in Preston, 2002: 250)

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[37] "Yokuts Narrative Style," by Anna Gayton. *Language in Culture and Society*. Ed. D.H. Hymes. New York: Harper and Row, 1964: 379.

Richard Preston's *Cree Narrative* explains how listeners of an orator are expected to be able to fill in the gaps in the narration with their own understanding of the story or from other experiences. It is more than an understanding of individual identity, it demands the listener to participate, and know "how to interpret omissions or clues… a kind of psychological forcing, obliging the listener to keep pace with the events, and with a sense of the sequence of contexts that the events require" (Preston, 2002: 250). Within a ritual ceremony, it is expected that participants will understand what is meant or why something must be done a certain way. They are also expected to know that asking a question such as, "why does there always have to be four men sitting there?" in a Sun Dance, can't be answered without the entire framework of Plains Cree beliefs being explained.

Indigenous religions are not like western religions, and the study and understanding of them is complex and difficult. Previous religious scholars have commented on how it is impossible to standardize (Preston 2002: 169, 172), or come up with a set core belief system that Pan-Indianism attempts. Traditional women's understanding and explanation of menstrual taboos will be different for every Nation. The taboo is a core belief, but its sacred origin is unique to each. How then is it explained to women who did not grow up within that belief system, or who live in an urban centre with many First Nation cultures? The issue of connection to place becomes not just a political issue challenging individual identity, but a realistic question as to how Pan-Indian practices differ from other New Age systems of spirituality.

Donaldson's *On Medicine Women and White Shame-ans,* makes the point that the theft of traditional Indigenous knowledge by transnational corporations, is in addition to the

other global thefts of Indigenous religious traditions. Traditional knowledge and religious practices are marketed without the "the ethical, epistemological or ecological organization of that knowledge system" (Donaldson 694). But is it "theft" when First Nations take elements of a belief system, out of the context of the culture they originated from? Does the common "knowledge system" still exist? Aboriginal western feminism assumes the common knowledge systems continue to exist, but the methods for spiritual expression need to change.

However, when the validity question is posed to Aboriginal western feminists and they are asked to explain why gender roles need to be addressed, it is difficult to justify the need when the sacred origin for such a change hasn't been established. The "assumption of shared understandings" comes into play, as members of a *community* Aboriginal western feminists have not sought the guidance or approval from the Elder women of the Nation they represent - a common Indigenous "knowledge system" principle. Paula Gunn Allen in *Off the Reservation*, suggests seeking the approval of other women in the context of female liberation from male authority globally, is crucial. Her precepts shared by other scholars are based in not only feminist ideals, but feminine as well:

> a. gratitude to the largest, most powerful female in a woman's life, her mother;
>
> b. willingness to see herself as part of a female commonality – in other words, to recognize that she is female, not androgynous, neuter, or "the same as a man"; and

> c. recognize that her femininity requires that she look to other women for evaluation, judgment, and approval, for only by virtue of these three can a woman experience the sense of social bonding and public validation upon which to build a solid sense of self-esteem. (Allen, 1998 79)

Is questioning the gender roles within Aboriginal spirituality a feminist issue or a need for individuality? The line that separates how Aboriginal people operate within their everyday lives and the cultural expectations of them is always blurred. Henry Felix describes this as colonial heritage and culture, with two systems operating at the same time -- "two different minds working." Needing to exist and function in Canada's western, fast-paced society is required for the survival of modern Aboriginal families. Elders acknowledge the world their young people exist in is very difficult and fast. Nothing like the world they grew up in. But change is nothing new with each generation of Aboriginal people experiencing it in different ways. But it is the breakdown of social and cultural norms that is the most alarming for Elders today and their religious traditions being challenged. This isn't an equality issue to Elders or Traditionalists; it is the result of Aboriginal people too far removed from their own cultures to understand protocol, sacred origins or faith.

Chapter 4

IS THERE A NEED FOR RE-VISIONING WOMEN'S ROLES WITHIN CEREMONIES?

Women's roles within sacred ceremonies are under scrutiny, similar to all religions in which men are believed to be the only primary participants or representative in a leadership role. The Plains Cree Sun Dance ceremony has male and female participants, however the Pledger is always male. Most participants of today's era do not know why this is so, and very few question it. Many would be interested to know that the ceremony, which is similar in form to many other Plains tribes, was given to children by other-than-human entities. Gender, according to oral history, was not specific. While new aspects of other cultures have been integrated, and the clothing worn by participant's changes with the styles of modern day, the structure, length and spiritual elements have remained the same.

The Thirst Dance

It is said that a long time ago forty children were separated from their parents when their camp was moved. A herd of buffalo had passed between the two parties, erasing the parents' tracks. Older children looked after the younger ones, hunting for small animals and carrying those who could no longer walk. Some of the parents went back from to search for the children but a storm had wiped out any sign of them. The children were lost for a long time, and were soon going hungry. It was during this time of difficulty that a light in the sky appeared to the children and a voice from the light advised them not to be afraid of the light

or voices they hear. They were told visitors would come to show the children how to help themselves (Christensen 28).

The visitors were spirits who were helpers of the voice from the light. Their names were *Okimâwikosisân*, the Chief's son and was the Bear spirit (the voice from the light was the Chief); *Kihc'ôskâpewis*, the Chief's helper, the Sun; *Okimâw'piyesiw*, Chief Thunderbird; *Kisenâpew'yôtin*, Old Man Wind; *Kisenâpewimostos*, Old Man Buffalo; *Asinâpewiyiniw*, Old Man Stone; *Mistikonâpewiyiniw*, the Tree Spirit. The children were told to pray to all these spirits. Each spirit they were told would visit them to give them instructions to build a Sun Dance Lodge. They would be given songs as well (29).

The children would need to build a sweat lodge and were instructed on how to build it, facing it the east. They also had to build a large tipi-type lodge – *Maskokamik*[38] which would be called the Singing lodge: *Wehkâtawikân*. The offerings they would need were forty little sticks which to be shaped like arrows. The children were taught songs by the spirits, Bear songs, Sun songs, Thunderbird songs, Wind songs, Buffalo songs, Tree songs and other songs. These songs were slow sacred songs sung in the *Wehkâtawikân* before the Sun Dance and were called *pekihkâtahikana* (29).

Some of the children were told to sing, others were told they had to dance, but all had to pray. When the children promised,[39] they would dance for something they really wanted. All of the children would be given different things when they prayed. The Thunderbird gave the children *pipikwan*[40] to blow on when they danced. The children were

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[38] Bear Lodge (29).
[39] This promise is the commitment to Dance in the Sun Dance.
[40] Whistle (29).

instructed to make the *Wehkâtawikân* four times and bring offerings: berries, the forty little sticks and other sacred items. These items were incensed[41] and prayed with by the maker of the Sun Dance Lodge[42] as offerings. The children were told to give thanks for the food they had and then eat together (30). After the *Wekâtawikân* had been sung four times the children could then build the Sun Dance Lodge.[43]

The Sun Dance lodge had to be constructed from twelve poles and the person who had promised to make the Sun Dance had to be among the builders. The next Sun Dance lodge built had to have sixteen poles, the next twenty poles and the fourth time would have twenty-four poles. If those who were participating had a lot of confidence in the one who promised a fifth lodge could be built if he agreed, but if the one who promised built a fifth lodge it would have twenty-eight poles and he would have to then build three more after. Each year four more poles would be added until the eighth year when there would be forty poles. When a person who has promised gets to forty poles, that is the most they should do, eight Sun Dances (30).

After the children completed the four *Wehkâtawikân,* they began to build the Sun Dance lodge with the door facing to the south. The spirits were very particular about how things were to be done. The *Okimâwâhtik,* the Chief Tree, was chosen and a moon, Thunderbird and Buffalo were carved on it. Then it was put in the centre of the Sun Dance lodge. Rocks were placed around the bottom of the *Okimâwâhtik,* to represent the spirit of

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[41] This is commonly known as smudging, using the smoke from sweet grass, sage or other medicine to clean the offerings.
[42] In anthropological terms, this person is the Pledger.
[43] The four singings in a sweat lodge are done over a year, with the fourth the night before the building of the Sun Dance lodge.

Old Man Stone. At the back of the lodge an altar, *kahkateyehkan,* was prepared with a buffalo skull placed on it. Then four people had to sit where the four spirits would sit, the Sun, the Thunderbird, Old Man Wind, Old Man Buffalo. The children were then given the sacred pipe ceremony, *kîmâskonikewin.* After all the preparations were made and the one who promised to build the Sun Dance lodge had finished praying and the pipe ceremony the Sun Dance could begin. The boys would be on one side and the girls on the other. The Sun Dance would then start with a slow spirit song, *epekihkâtahiket,* sung by the one who promised. When that was done the drummers would start to drum and the dancers would blow their whistles to the beat (31).

It had been a long time since the parents and the children had been separated. But when the whistles started, the parents heard them because they were to the south of the lodge. Scouts were sent over the hill they were by to check out what was causing the noises. The scouts ran back and reported the pointed lodge with a big, round lodge in front of it with a tree in the centre. They didn't know what kind of people they were, but that they were singing and dancing in a big round lodge that they had never seen before. The people went toward the big lodge; then some of the people recognized some of the children. Excited, the parents realized it was their lost children, their lost grandchildren and they ran down the hill towards them, yelling and shouting as they did. There was laughing and crying as the parents and children were united (32).

It was understood that the Sun Dance was given by the Creator to the children to bring their parents to them, for them to hear their whistles and drumming. The Creator gave the children and their parents' blessings, kinship, love and wellness (32). The parents

wondered who had taught the children the songs and how to build the lodge. The children told them the Creator had *okîsikowak*, sky spirits, working for him and they taught them everything. The children then taught their parents and grandparents so they would always have the Creator's blessings generation after generation. Forty sticks shaped like arrows represented the offerings[44] of the forty lost children (33).[45]

Modernity vs. Tradition

Why the Pledger in the Sun Dance is always a man is questioned by modern Aboriginal women who could argue gender isn't important, therefore why not a woman? The issue then is raised that since it is not performed by children, gender does become important because of menstrual taboos. Wanting to become a Pledger, while ignoring long-held beliefs by many tribes, not just Plains Cree, is arguably the axis of the issue, the needs and wants of the individual over the group - ego over spirit. But whether or not feminist equality will be applicable to Indigenous religious ceremonies will depend on the overall acceptance by First Nations that gender equality is important enough to be dealt with within the religious context. The authority will ultimately come from those who practice the ceremonies, rather than an academic examination.

Diane Eaglespeaker, a Blood Sun Dancer, acknowledges that in her culture women didn't Sun Dance. She participates in Blackfoot Sun Dances now because she sees it as being

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[44] "Contemporary offerings consist of cloth print and ribbons called *wepinâsowina*. The cloth offering is a robe or a shawl for the spirits to dance with when the people sing. The ribbons are given to the spirits so they have fancy tassels with which to dance" (33).

[45] Elder Mike Steinhauer from the Saddle Lake First Nation in Albert was asked on Sept. 26th, 2007, if he had ever heard this version of the Thirst Dance. He had not, though he liked it better than the only story he knew that explain the origin of the Sun Dance. It was a Dakota Sioux story in which the ceremony was given to a woman.

similar to the changing roles women have taken. She believes that work which was traditionally done by men (such as bringing in money), women now do (Anderson, *A Recognition of Being* 178). In order to fit in with her belief that women will take on new roles in ceremonies, she has had to join Sun Dancers from a different culture than her own, Blackfoot, not Blood.

The argument that new economic realities have affected Aboriginal women and adaptation has become necessary cannot be discussed without a long history of colonization. One cannot make religious ceremonies comparable to the economic changes Aboriginal people have experienced, without visiting why the gender roles exist. Women always contributed to the welfare of their families which included items needed, such as food and clothing, or craft skills. The value and worth of a woman increased with her abilities to procure items needed by the entire Nation, and which she could trade.

The areas of change within Aboriginal cultures are the loss of cultural understandings, specifically menstruation taboos, and confusion over what exactly constitutes religion and what is merely cultural. Does a cultural gathering have the same requirements as a religious gathering? When a powwow has sacred elements comparable to a Sun Dance, should the protocols still exist? Cultural events are understood to be more open to the beliefs and dances of others, and sharing concepts and philosophies. The difficulty that some Elders have is the use of items viewed as sacred within religious life, being used more as props in cultural events without the sacredness attached. Like the women's drum group, there is a changing opinion amongst the young that the items themselves aren't sacred, just the event. In past generations, it was believed by the Plains

Cree that there were spirits attached to certain items, as well as certain items having symbolic meaning which were treated the same (e.g. Eagle whistles and Eagles) (Mandelbaum 157-158). But as Henry Felix acknowledges, his beliefs may not be shared by all, and a lot has been lost. His hopes for traditional religious understandings in the future are dim.

> Everything will be lost. You know there will be no value [to ceremonies], the value will be money. As it stands right now, we have a lot of young men that want to be Elders, but they only see a dollar sign at the end of that. And they say pipes are really easy to come by nowadays. You know, they're not earned anymore; you can buy them for twenty, thirty bucks. You know that's not acquiring by earning. I never had a pipe until not too long ago, and I'm sixty years old. A pipe that I can rightly call my own... It's not even mine; I'm carrying it for the family. I have two pipes. I have my mother's pipe and I have my dad's pipe and I carry it for the family, the whole family. They're not mine; those will have to be passed on to the person who I think is going to look after them. And I don't even know who that is; maybe this is where they end. You know it's scary that question that you ask me, "how is it going to be like in ten or fifteen years." (Felix, Henry)

Most Elders are concerned about the loss of the integrity of the ceremonies, and the loss of the sacred knowledge passed down orally throughout the generations. Women's roles and questioning what they should be is just an extension of how much has been lost. But unlike the younger generations who understand ideologically that culture and religion

are one and the same, Elders acknowledge that the need to live in two different worlds, and functioning differently in both, has become necessary. This mental and spiritual separation seems to explain how so much violence and abuse can occur in Aboriginal communities, yet male abusers can still be welcomed in ceremonies. Aboriginal women in general acknowledge that the dysfunction in urban and grassroots communities is a serious issue; whether Canadian laws or Traditional laws should be used in solving the problems is undecided. If women and children are abused by their male family members, then Canadian law should apply because the men are not functioning in a Traditional manner. On the other hand, if the male abuser has been abused himself in a Canadian system (i.e. Residential school), then arguably only a Traditional form of healing will bring the man back to his cultural and spiritual roots.

The fact that women have more responsibilities in Aboriginal communities and less power is part of the western feminist concern. Aboriginal women do not have the same leniency granted them within Traditional situations as men, because their roles of cultural supporter and main childcare giver have not changed throughout the history of colonization. This seems to have an impact on how their roles are evaluated and whether they should change. Many times women have been given the credit for the continuation of Aboriginal cultures and people. Their roles as mothers and teachers are essential, and their positions within Aboriginal cultures have not altered much. Ceremonially women's roles must remain static because any revisions to the larger ceremonies have not come through sacred methods.

There is the common menstrual taboo, accepted and practiced broadly across North America. There are not ethnographically recorded reasons for each Nation, but the general reason is that during a woman's moon-time she is different than all others in her society, and therefore places others at risk, human and other-than-human.

> In most ceremonies they [women] kind of segregate themselves from the ceremonies. In most ceremonies there's offerings, there's cloths, there's medicines, there's all sorts of items that women can kill just being there. Even on their menstruation and the men are singing, something happens to the voice, it kind of *cuts it*. She's so powerful at that time, that's why a long time ago, they, not pushed them away but very gently, "This is where you belong." Like I believe, I believe that woman should participate equally with their partners, their husbands, their grandfathers, their husbands, they should participate equally. But we all understand that there are only certain things a woman can do in any ceremonies. We understand that. Their purpose is to maybe cook for that celebration because men have the construction of say the sweat lodges. They do that while the women cook. But they still participate equally. You know it's coming to the point where everybody does a little bit of work to be able to make this thing happen. Like a sweat lodge. We need to coordinate everything so that when we come out, things are ready for us. I believe it's a kind of ceremony in itself when you go into a sweat lodge. The meal comes as a final finish of the sweat lodge, that's

how I see it. I strongly believe that woman should partake to the fullest of the intended ceremony. (Felix, Henry)

The fact that women are not viewed as "powerful" during her moon-time in her every-day life raises the obvious question of whether the menstrual taboo applied during ceremonies is really because of sacred laws. Some argue that using "sacred laws" that are only used sporadically is another method of control over women. "Knowledge is power" and sacred knowledge is the ultimate power. It is not unrealistic to view women's taboos as a way to exclude women from the availability of sacred knowledge. Western feminism differs in this question, not whether women can access sacred knowledge and benefit from the other-than human gifts, rather women's right to hold a primary position within the religion. Many Elders believe that those young people who question the way ceremonies have been handed down to them are coming from a western viewpoint with their individual wants taking precedence over the way the ceremonies have always been performed. They do not have a problem with young people who are interested in learning about ceremonies, but they do question the motivation.

> I understand that the teachings of my people were directed at instilling in our young children a sense of the self and our importance in the community. The teachings required that we seek not our own happiness but the well-being of others. This means that the self-indulgent ideology of "me first" runs contrary to our laws. In fact, individualism destroys the potential of each of us to contribute to the development of the nation. Worse it narrows the development of the individual to a perverse form of consumerism. Thus, the

> luxury-oriented consumerism of this society runs contrary to our laws (Maracle, Lee 41).

Henry Felix has seen many changes in his Plains Cree culture since he was a boy; changes to powwows, the use of sacred items in non-sacred events, and the disregard for the sacred meaning in cultural symbols.

> [When I see] a woman pounding on, beating on a drum. It has an effect on me because I have my old ways. And I have a problem with women carrying Eagle feathers when they're dancing. I have a problem with that, but that's my problem. I'm not going to put it into your problem. A long time ago the Indian man, the warrior that carried those things, but only symbolically. Now they use them as their personal fans, and they drop them all over. You know in that powwow when an Eagle feather is dropped, there is a ceremony. And women just drop their feathers on the ground and there's no respect to that. I have a problem... Even some of the young men did not earn those feathers that they carry. You know it's so easy nowadays to buy feathers, to kill an Eagle for no reason, just for that reason. We are really exploiting ourselves, exploiting what's out there that used to help us. When you watch a powwow and you'll see all those millions of feathers that they use, can you imagine how many Eagles we have *killed for that*? So that we can *exploit that*? The thing that bothers me too is we don these feathers and we compete for money! (Felix, Henry)

Mr. Felix does not believe he is being unfair on how young women and men are told they are doing things incorrectly such as putting their Eagle fans used in powwows, on the ground. Women are not treated differently when such violations occur. He points out that the teachings on how to handle Eagle feathers is given to young boys and men, by men. If young women feel they are being treated unfairly because it is a man who has chastised them for putting the fan on the ground, Mr. Felix points out that it is a man's teaching. It isn't a sexist issue to him. It is widely accepted that women have teachings given only to young women by Elder women which men are not privy to. The ways in which sacred items are to be handled, is man's teaching. He does not know how this is to be handled because it is another area of change within his culture that has not been considered.

> I have a serious problem with the middle aged, the now-age women not telling their girls how to act or react within the ceremonies. You can probably bet your bottom dollar in any Round Dance you'd see half a dozen girls menstruating. It's just not right. How do you, how do we pass that message on? You know we got to have Elderly women going into schools when girls start to come to their time, to be told and taught, "This is the way it was, this is the way it should be. This is how we should continue." (Felix, Henry)

Mr. Felix is not alone in his concerns. Elder Wilma Schreder believes women are becoming more aggressive and are doing what they want in order to control all aspects of their lives. The need for total control disrespects the men's role within the Nation. Earning an income does not necessarily equate with the right to control the home, family and tribe, says Schreder, or the right to control sacred ceremonies. She believes what is occurring right

now with women wanting to control so many areas, is having negative effects on familial ties and women's traditional roles as mother's, wives and model citizens. She believes women are not learning traditions properly because they don't take the time to. Henry Felix explains, "You can't go up there and say, "Why aren't you doing this?" They'll [the young women] probably tell you to go to hell. That is the attitude that women are taking now because, 'you don't need to know what I need to know.'"

> My grandmother had never been to school and was curious to know what I was learning. She had some seventy grandchildren and another thirty-two great grandchildren, and at that point I was the only one who had gone to university. As she was one of the most magnificent people I knew, I wanted to prove that I was worthy of her question. I responded by saying that I was learning about women's liberation...but my grandmother had no idea what I was talking about. When she asked me to explain what I meant by women's liberation, I replied that women wanted to be equal with their men. It was about equality, I thought. But when my grandfather translated these notions into Mohawk, and when I asked my grandfather to translate, he told me that her exact words were "Why would women want to lower themselves to be equal to men?" (Maracle, Sylvia 74)

What is traditional for Cree women has changed over the generations, while certain aspects have remained the same. Sandra Felix, as the wife of Henry Felix, describes how she was taught to behave as a young woman.

As a young girl growing up under my great-grandmother, I was expected to behave in a respectful manner during ceremonies such as Sun Dances, healing gatherings, feasts and grave cleaning. The expectation was to sit still and follow her example, directions and actions. She used to say that if I was disrespectful that bad things would come up on me. The status of the family was key in her teachings. I was never to do any bad things that might put family in danger or in a state of humiliation. This meant being respectful towards family, visitors and community. When visitors came, I had to wait on them during their stay by being helpful and quiet. During traditional ceremonies, I had to stay in the tent and wait for her return or sit with her during ceremonies in a quiet manner. As a wife, I was to obey and never disrespect my husband regard[less] of what my life was to become. I was to stand by him and support him in good and bad situations. Being loyal and honest were key values to a solid relationship. I was to bring honour to my partner by being respectful toward him, listen to him, obey his directions and be thankful that he is taking care of me. I was to stay away from bad women who might influence my behaviour. She mentioned some women who were bad examples of being a single parent and who frequented the city life. As a mother, my sole responsibility was to take care of my children and teach them what I learned. I was to never have children out of wedlock as this would bring embarrassment upon the family. So when I started to live with my boyfriend, she would visit me continually to check on my status of

> pregnancy. Once I became with child, she immediately planned and funded my wedding to ensure no embarrassment to the family. Once I was married she did not become involved in my marriage. It was like being deserted with no support for further advice and guidance. I was on my own now that I found a partner. (Felix, Sandra)

According to Sandra, the teachings for womanhood were finished once she became married. The cultural practice was, and still is, to stay out of the affairs of a married couple, leaving any conflicts up the couple to work out. The exception Mandelbaum noted was mistreatment.

> After they were married, the man's father would give the girl's father some clothing and a horse. The girl's father reciprocated with gifts. The young couple went back and forth between his and her parents. The husband might be mean and the girl would return to her parents. The father of the girl would send her back with clothing and horses to shame her husband into being kind to her. By that means many young men were stopped from being cruel to their wives. (148)

The conventional view is that Aboriginal communities are in crisis and the cultural notions of behaviour and social expectations towards women have been somewhat disregarded. Interference by extended family in cases of abuse is rarely if ever done. There isn't a family that hasn't been affected by alcoholism, and there is a cultural understanding that people are not themselves when they are intoxicated. Sandra Felix explains how the

clash between cultural expectations and alcoholism forced her to make a difficult decision regarding her first marriage.

> During my years of marriage, I questioned my role as a woman role in marriage. As a young bride, I practiced her teaching of loyalty, honesty, obedience and respect but things were not harmonious. I began to question my feelings of pain, fear, depression, powerlessness, suicidal thoughts and hopelessness. His actions of abuse were verbal, physical and sexual began my state of questioning my grandmother's teachings. I questioned if this was the life I was to endure forever. Because of my feelings, I began to search for answers for increased well being. I used education as a tool to build understanding of myself and life. Through education[46] I found that I could take back control of my life and that my grandmother's teachings were keeping me trapped in a life I did not want anymore. So I prayed to my great-grandmother that I made a decision to leave my marriage and become an independent woman. I asked for her forgiveness and became an independent woman. (Felix, Sandra)

Traditionally, amongst Plains Cree Mandelbaum notes that if a couple were incompatible, either the man or woman could return to their parents. Whoever remained in the marriage tipi looked after the children and kept the household property. After a while, each was free to marry again (150). There is no mention of how Plains Cree society dealt with abuse from alcoholism, and it is apparent there hasn't been a cultural response to date.

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[46] Sandra Felix earned a Master's degree in Education.

Part of the difficulty in adjusting to such abuse is that many times, the abuse is so violent, Aboriginal people respond in shock; they do nothing. When Plains Cree societies were intact and functioning as a cohesive culture, mistreatment of the women or children was dealt with. But today, there is a feeling of helplessness amongst Elders as to how to deal with substance abuses.

In Henry Felix's upbringing there was a cultural understanding that White man ways (alcohol consumption) and Tradition were two different worlds which were not to be crossed. Because of the way he was raised, he finds it difficult to criticize family members who are alcoholics because it was an accepted way to have family celebrations. There was never a social gathering without alcohol, "that's how we celebrated. Now I wish I had known better."

When asked about the effects of alcoholism, and passing on traditional teachings, Mr. Felix recognizes the immensity of the problem. He sees people around him and within his family who have valuable cultural knowledge to pass on, but are also struggling with a range of addictions. "They're all indulgers and how are they supposed to hand down something like that when they're handing something else down?" To him, and the ways he was taught, an Elder needs to live as an example to everyone. His father maintained a sober lifestyle once he committed to being an Elder and began formally taking on apprentices. But at times he feels that trying to maintain cultural traditions and religious ceremonies is pointless.

> Everything has to change to especially the sober lifestyle. You know that comes to everything else, the drinking, the gambling... everything has to

> come to a minimum or just stop entirely. You know the frustrations that I go through trying to do this are really phenomenal. And sometimes I want to say, "To hell with it all, I'd like my own life." A lot of times that comes to my mind. (Felix, Henry)

New Age vs. Indigenous beliefs

Within Aboriginal traditions, the difficulty is in understanding what falls under "group" and what is "individualistic." Whilst rituals are practiced by the group as a whole, the reasoning for being there is up to the individual. The appeal of Aboriginal traditions to some is the apparent freedom of religious expression within cultures, with little doctrine to be followed. If not familiar with the particular Indigenous culture, one can be drawn to the fascination with the "otherness" of the rituals. On the other hand, the expectation that the individual will act accordingly is impossible to impose on one who is from outside the culture. Paul Heelas' "The Spiritual Revolution: from 'Religion' to 'Spirituality'" discusses the appeal of New Age expressions of religion. He states that individuals who want to take a deeper look at their own lives are more likely to follow a form of religion that doesn't question their existence or how they live (372).

> They [New Age religions] promise the great therapeutic, miraculous, healing, life-enhancing and empowering shift. That is, from an old life (due to the contaminations of modernity, the Fall, or both) to the new life (resting with intrinsic spirituality, the salvational coming-to-dwell of the God from without, or both). Liberation, healing, the release of potential, all contribute to make the most of one's own life in this world. (372)

There is in some cases, a fine line as to what an Aboriginal tradition is, and what a New Age precept is. Lee Maracle in *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* explains her distrust of Native spirituality because, she believes, many of the Native spiritual leaders are "charlatans – caricatures of our past" (36). She observed that the revitalization movement of the late sixties and early seventies was very different from her grandmother's teachings. The traditionalism that was emerging was from an urban base, and was from non-Native traditions. She explains that the urban traditionalists had never known anything different, and were recreating tradition. "Some of the people in the communities had never left themselves behind and, hence, had no need to find themselves or go back to themselves" (37).

Within Cree culture, personal autonomy is very important, but doesn't entitle an individual to act inappropriately. In 1975, Richard J. Preston's work described the Cree society.

> Social sanctions, the thoughts and feelings of others (and their non-violent actions) are anticipated, desired or feared, and actively sought or responded to in precisely patterned ways by almost all individuals, almost all of the time. But perhaps self-sanctions, autonomy and pride in one's own social competence, count for at least as much as social sanctions. Self-sanctions derive ultimately, of course, for social sanctions, since the learned norms are internalized and imbedded in each personality as a response to his social milieu. (26-27)

The difficulty in maintaining cultural ceremonies, and integrating new ideas and methods is a struggle for all First Nations. Who gets to decide what will be changed and what will remain the same?

> When I was a child, it was time for a social gathering in the camp, to be with other children, to be with family. But we were restricted with where and when we played and we had to be present beside our parents when it was time for the ceremonies. The whole camp would go to bed when it was dark. Not like today where children are running around in the dark and making a lot of noise. They have no respect for the people who are sleeping. The parents' teachings are affecting the lifestyle. This generation doesn't pass on the discipline and respect. The children don't even know how to act now. Restriction was explained, if it was a Sun Dance, the Elder that's in the lodge needs to have his rest because he has to be up before sunrise. A lot of Elders and dancers slept in the lodge, most didn't leave the lodge the whole time. (Schreder)

Meaning of the Thirst Dance

Henry Felix believes that if more people knew the mythology of the Thirst Dance, more children would probably participate. Mr. Felix believes that it is not vital to the ceremony for women to take part. If women chose not to participate, he believes there would still be a Sun Dance. "If a man set up a Sun Dance Lodge, even if there's one, that's all it takes. It doesn't even have to… Nobody even has to dance." The requirement according to Mr. Felix is the purity of the intention, the faithful reconstruction of the

ceremony and the proper reasons for doing it. Ego and prestige cannot be a motivating factor.

> It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. One time, when my ex [wife] left me I was so devastated I sweated by myself. I slept in there just about the whole night. It does not matter, a ceremony is a ceremony! If it's done by one person, if it's done by two people or done by a hundred. It is still a ceremony. It's a ceremony that goes through the protocol of the action. It comes with the protocol, the flags. You know. I don't do a ceremony without a flag and the offering. Because that protocol asked for my guidance, asked for my ceremony. This is when the older woman comes into play. Do you know the protocol of why we came here? Protocol, anytime you want to know something you offer tobacco. Protocol, if you want your whistle smudged, tobacco. Protocol if you want to know how to blow the whistle. All of these protocols are relatively inexpensive. A cigarette is all it takes. (Felix, Henry)

Unlike other Plains cultures, the Plains Cree Sun Dance does not have specific gender requirements for roles within the ceremony. The Blackfoot Sun Dance ceremony is led by a woman and cannot take place if there isn't a woman willing to take on the role of the Holy Woman (Kehoe, 116). Gertie Beaucage (as cited in Anderson, *A Recognition of Being*) states:

> Midewiwin[47] offers a very real understanding that creation doesn't continue without male-female balance. There is nothing that you can do that is completely female, nor completely male. Even in the way that the Midewiwin society operates, the teaching lodge, the sweat lodge – I mean, the men can bend as many poles as they want; if the women are not there to ties the poles together they will not have a lodge. It's a very simple but very profound teaching tool, that each of them plays a role, and they can't complete their work without each other (175).

The Plains Cree Sun Dance for reasons unknown, or more to do with the overall philosophy, does not have such roles. Women are recognized as having equal spiritual capabilities, though the ceremonies with both men and women are always performed by a man.

The likelihood of this changing is not likely according to the Elders interviewed. The performance of the rituals will not be done by women, at least not in their life time.

> We had respect for those who were taking part and we were taught to help in any way we could, even if it was to set up camp, cook for the workers, cook for the feasts, get firewood, water, and the men did all the heavy work such as building the lodges, taking care of the fires, serving the Elders and assisting with the ceremonial rituals. Everyone was there to work and they needed their rest. (Schreder)

Wanting to have a more prominent or primary role within a Sun Dance, has more to do with ego and needing individual acknowledgement. Mr. Felix believes that women who take part

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[47] Medicine society.

to show off jewellery, trying to fast longer than the Pledger or sing as well as the men have the wrong motivations.

> The First and foremost is because there was a happening before the Sun Dance, that is why they are there. And it's up to those older people at the back of the rail to tell those women, "This is how it is with us, this is how it was with my mother, this the way it was with my grandmother. Why are you changing it?" (Felix, Henry)

With modern First Nations people, religious ceremonial life and everyday life are at odds. Marriage is no longer culturally necessary, common-law relationships have become the norm, and menstruation ceremonies are rarely performed. The no longer practiced cultural traditions that ushered in womanhood have left a void of understanding and communication between the generations of Cree women. However, to an extent women are still the ones that maintain the family unit and the well-being of the family. This has meant that women have now become a large part of the Aboriginal workforce.

It is understandable that at some point there should be recognition of the role women have had to take on as the family's main source of income, and that on some levels this should transmit to religious ceremonial life. However, the primary role held by men has little to do with superiority, and more to do with how previous generations of Plains Cree functioned. In everyday life, First Nations men have appeared to have a more difficult time finding new roles within their communities than the women. But along with the re-enactment of traditional equality, there is also the respect paid to men's traditional roles when the Plains Cree society operated without European interference.

Whether or not women should be Pledgers in the Plains Cree Sun Dance may not even be an issue in the next generation. The Sun Dance in 2007 performed by Henry Felix had only one male below the age of sixty years of age to help with the construction of the singing lodge and Sun Dance lodge. At the end of the Sun Dance, the Elders who had participated all stood and said a few words about the need for the young men to come and help in the future. These men realized how close the end may be for the most sacred ceremony they have, and their grief was evident.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

Should Euro-Canadian feminism be applied to Aboriginal sacred ceremonies, as some Aboriginal women have come to believe it should? Within the Aboriginal community, there have been the two camps of people seemingly since colonization: Traditionalists who value the lifestyle and belief system prior to the arrival of Europeans, and those who have attempted to join mainstream white society. Recently, this opposition in belief systems has become evident with regards to Aboriginal belief systems. Traditional women are content with the state of women's supportive roles within certain ceremonies, while women who have adopted a western feminist view believe women should be able to occupy primary positions within the ceremonies, and that ceremonies should evolve as Aboriginal cultures have been forced to do.

- **Western feminism**

In researching this issue, it was necessary to understand the development of feminism. In the 1700's the middle-class questioned the hierarchical nature of their society, the power of their religious order and the inability for people who were not part of the elite to have a voice within the politics of the day. As a natural progression, feminism addressed the rights of women to have a more public role in European society and their rights to be autonomous human beings. However, the overriding racism of the era prohibited non-white women from taking part in the movement. The next phase of feminism addressed women of color, and their rights to what European women had demanded.

- **Feminism for women of color**

The feminist movement, in its beginnings, left out a large portion of the female population. This was in keeping with the era as the upper-class European women who desired autonomy did not have to rear their own children, tend the household or work outside the home or for someone else. Women of color and their inclusion in the feminist movement began in earnest alongside the civil rights movement. However, Black[48] women and immigrant women of color differed from Aboriginal women because of history. In essence, Aboriginal women are not entirely included in a movement that still tolerates legislation that only applies to them because of their race. The second wave of feminism has not yet dealt with Aboriginal women who are still addressing issues that were resolved for women of color decades ago.

In a way, mainstream society protects minority women more than First Nations women, and none of the groups initially left out of the feminist movement including women of color (disabled, elderly, lesbians, minorities) have supported Aboriginal women other than lip-service. Some feminists would point out poet Pauline Johnson in the 1890's was a spokesperson for Aboriginal women because she encouraged self-enfranchisement (Elliot and Mandell, 5). However, enfranchisement[49] was not seen as desirable by First Nations. Not understanding why this was so only highlights the continued non-inclusion of Aboriginal women in the second-wave movement.

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[48] Because all women are not from Africa, Black has been used rather than African-American, Caribbean-American, etc.

[49] Enfranchisement Act: "whereby Indians could acquire full Canadian citizenship by relinquishing system ties to their community" (Hick 2007). The process involved giving up one's culture and traditions, any rights to land, and was more expensive for Aboriginal people than it was for immigrants.

- **Western feminism and Aboriginal women**

For some Aboriginal women the application of feminism has progressed as their communities have developed under the imposed *Indian Act*. As Indian Reserves have developed in Canada, more and more inequalities have been exposed by Aboriginal women with regards to sexist laws within the race-based Act. Originally under the *Act* only men could become Chiefs and Councillors, and only men could retain the land through the Reserve system. Aboriginal women, like their European predecessors, have begun to challenge the hierarchical social system which now exists within Aboriginal communities after generations of very limited opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and outside Federal monies as the primary source of income for the people. They have also begun to challenge the assumption that Native Nations all functioned with male leaders, with men managing the material wealth, and men dividing up the resources without input by the women. Feminist argue that if this was the case, why the need to create a completely different legislative body to deal with Indians when they were so similar to Europeans?

Many Aboriginal women question the ability for the men to address their concerns of sexual inequality within their communities, when it is their men who have adapted to legislation which so thoroughly wiped-out any voice women had. In the past there was not much choice in the matter for First Nations, but there is today. It appears, according to many Aboriginal women, the men seem reluctant to hand over the power they have acquired under a powerless system. Laws which were racist from their inception were different for men and women, affecting women more negatively on a social and cultural scale.

The generations that have not lived with the *Indian Act* governing their lives, or within the sheltered and isolated social conditions of Indian Reserves, have an "outsider's" view of how internalized many colonial-era European values have become for grass-roots communities. Women who have not had to live with the paternalistic social atmosphere see how distorted the views of *Traditional* have become. Gender inequality does exist within Aboriginal communities, but for some, Aboriginal women who put forth that the same distortion of tradition has occurred in the sacred ceremonies as well-- are going too far.

- **Aboriginal feminism**

Aboriginal feminism, if there is such a term, was defined by Grace Ouellette in *The Fourth World: An Indigenous Perspective on Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Activism* as the struggle by Aboriginal women for the equal treatment of Aboriginal people based on race, not gender. Aboriginal feminism maintains that there should be equal access to education, healthcare, employment and economic prosperity, as there is for minorities and mainstream society. Aboriginal women throughout the history of colonization have maintained many of the same roles as they had prior to European arrival. They have seen how these areas have worsened for their communities and for their people, despite improving for non-Native populations.

As a movement, Aboriginal feminists believe that putting their needs ahead of their communities because of their gender is not the way to go. Their communities as a whole are suffering, and it is only as a community that they can heal. Sexual equality in many cases doesn't apply to their community when the unemployment rate is at seventy-five percent or higher. Having sexual equality will not fix the deficient education many youth are receiving,

the health problems plaguing every age, and won't make them any more accepted by mainstream society. The underlying racism that still exists towards Aboriginal people is the problem and is what permits society to accept the lower standards of *life* as normal for Aboriginal people.

- **Traditionalist Aboriginal women**

Traditionalist women, sometimes contemporaries to young Aboriginal women with feminist views, believe that how their societies functioned prior to European arrival is what First Nations need to return to. The way to combat many of the inequalities that Aboriginal feminism identifies is to abide by pre-contact laws and social structures. Aboriginal societies had varying roles for men and women, but they were viewed as equally valuable. For the hierarchical social structure that exists, reinstate the Clan Mothers and give them back the right to chose from the young men who can be elected chief (by the men). This is good for Mohawks and other Six Nation tribes, however isn't in the traditional past of all other Nations.

In terms of religious ceremonies, the past is the answer as well. If it can be said that men have distorted a particular ceremony for their own benefit and access to other-than-human interaction, traditionalists say the spirits know the real truth and women will be rewarded for the understanding they give their misguided men, as well as how they have conducted themselves as women. On the other hand, because the ceremonies have continued despite European interference and many are so heavily ritualized that if they have been altered or changed, it was because the spirits wished it. Women who believe

either gender should be allowed to take on primary roles during a ceremony are not doing so to further women's rights, but are misguided and basing their beliefs on ego.

Traditionalist women respond to a western feminist view differently and more vehemently than they do in other areas of life such as education and healthcare, which they agree are problem areas with varied solutions. Sacred ceremonies were given to the People by the other-than-human entities. Questioning why men and women have different roles is questioning the wisdom of the spirits, or dismissing the faith of participants and the faith of their ancestors. In the first case, assuming one knows more than those in the spiritual world is arrogant. In the second case, questioning the faith of those before is adopting the same attitude as non-Native people and assuming Aboriginal ceremonies are not part of a legitimate religion but remnants of a pagan past practiced by simple people. A Traditionalist view believes women within Aboriginal ceremonies are not subservient to men because their sacred experiences are not dismissed. Sexual equality in all things is not applicable to a society in which women have specific roles and obligations *because* of their gender

- **Loss of knowledge**

How contemporary women understood traditional beliefs, and whether they were aware of the explanations why there are gender specific rules within ceremonies, was difficult to find. This was known before research was conducted, but it was surprising how little documentation has been collected on Aboriginal beliefs and ceremonies in the modern era. Within Aboriginal cultures, it is considered taboo to record anything to do with the other-than-human world, and discussing anything without the proper protocols (tobacco offerings) is wrong. This overwhelming belief has halted many teachings from being passed

down to future generations, and has resulted in virtually no new academic research for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to access. There are historical reasons for some of this which has put fear into Aboriginal people who share their knowledge of sacred ceremonies. The two main culprits for this multi-generational fear are the *Indian Act* and residential schools.

Once it was known how larger ceremonies were conducted like the Plains Sun Dance, they were prohibited by law under the *Indian Act*.[50] Residential schools allowed the Canadian government to remove children from their parents care and teach them Christian dogma without cultural interference (Canada *Indian and Northern Affairs*). The government no longer bans ceremonies and residential schools are no longer functioning, but the expectation that individuals will not discuss the sacred outside ceremonies has resulted in very few people within Aboriginal cultures knowing about their own traditional beliefs. The irony of the situation is that the Elders conducting the ceremonies believe that participants should already have a cursory knowledge of what is going on prior to attending as a spectator or as a participant.

- **A new kind of analysis is emerging**

Research involving Aboriginal women's perspectives has increased, and it appears to be in its second phase. Initial research on behalf of Aboriginal women was conducted by non-Native women, but many of their own gender issues were evident throughout their research. There was either the view that women were equals based on the value of their duties within the society, or women as a whole had been ignored in historical

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[50] *1895 Amendment to the Indian Act, Sec. 114*

documentation affecting how outsiders viewed the society. But like previous scholars, the role of women within sacred ceremonies was not approached. There are now Aboriginal women researching and writing on behalf of Aboriginal women. Most of the research involves poverty, *Indian Act* after-effects, and education. The writings of Aboriginal women with a western feminist approach looked at gender inequality within Aboriginal communities, inconsistencies within cultural beliefs and the actual treatment of women. The interesting outcome in researching Aboriginal western feminist perspectives was the self-identification of the scholars. The politically incorrect issue of questioning an individual's claims to Aboriginal ancestry, and how they justified their right to comment on certain Aboriginal issues became necessary. It was evident that in some cases the scholars knew less about what Aboriginal women felt were important issues than non-Native women who had lived and worked within Aboriginal communities.

- **Development of Pan-Indian religious expression**

This issue must exist in other cultural studies: how legitimate are the claims of an individual who claims to be of a minority culture without the disadvantages of appearing to be a person of color? The ability to live amongst both cultures has to be counted as an advantage, and therefore the research had to be considered with this fact. Of the newest writers with a western feminist perspective, Kim Anderson and Bonita Lawrence both acknowledged they were most familiar with mainstream society. Their writings lead to other questions of urbanization and whether urban Aboriginal residents can constitute a society with enough numbers. Further research questioned whether a functioning Aboriginal society still exists in grassroots communities or urban centres. There are no

statistics of who knows or understands Aboriginal traditional beliefs, but research showed that a growing number of Aboriginal people have little or no knowledge of their cultures, traditional beliefs, both urban and grassroots.

Within urban centres, gatherings of Aboriginal people were more cultural than religious. Elements from various First Nations were combined, but without the ritualized performance of sacred ceremonies. Therefore, because the particular function could not have its origin traced back to any sacred interaction, it becomes a Pan-Indian cultural ceremony. The women's berry ceremony in Toronto, for example, combines a Mohawk creation story with an Ojibwa women's berry ceremony (Anderson, "Honouring..." 385). Grassroots people attend ceremonies that originated with an other-than-human interaction, but very few attendees know or understand what they are witnessing. Fewer and fewer participate because they don't understand what is going on, and in many cases what is being said because of the loss of the First Nation language being used. Not understanding why women must behave a certain way makes the all-encompassing Pan-Indian gatherings more appealing, as well as the use of English as the primary language for communication.

- **The problem of the sacred**

It has previously been the case that much from Aboriginal cultures has been lost or borrowed from other cultures. The ceremonies and sacred rituals, when they have been preserved, have arguably remained unchanged since their inception. This area is now in danger of being lost forever too, as the Elders who are the keepers of these ceremonies pass on, or are the last in their communities to know the full ceremony. There are very few individuals to pass them on to who will dedicate themselves to the years of apprenticeship

required. The Pan-Indian cultural gatherings do not include the accepted methods for accessing spirit guides or spiritual entities of a specific culture, nor do they acknowledge the existence of anything specific. Prayers are generally to "the Creator" or ancestors. This eliminates any First Nation belief system from dominating a multi-cultural gathering, but it also discourages the accepted existence of other-than-human entities as part of numerous Aboriginal belief systems. The sacred interaction has become a taboo topic for many.

- **Traditional understandings related to warrior/hunter cultures**

The Plains Cree have a unique history, retaining elements of the eastern beliefs and combining them with their adopted warrior society values. In both societies, Cree women were not the primary religious specialists. On the Plains, women were valued for their proficiency processing food stores, and artistic abilities. The women's skills were essential, but in a warrior society men's tasks of hunting, horse stealing or trading, and abilities in warfare took precedence. These were the tasks that required greater spiritual assistance, and the ceremonial life revolved around these areas. Women had their own rituals, but it was not a community event. There was the acceptance of women gaining spiritual power during their menstrual seclusion, and it was generally noted that women were visited by female spiritual entities (Mandelbaum 160).

The story of the origin of the Plains Cree Sun Dance is an explanation of how they were given new spiritual helpers and the creation of new beliefs that fit with their new homeland. By giving the ceremony to children, the Sun Dance did not have specific male and female roles, nor did it stipulate the Pledger must be a man. That assumption is a combination of both warrior societies and eastern Algonquian societies.

- **Can there be new "Traditional" knowledge?**

It is evident that existing Aboriginal ceremonies may remain intact for the next generation, but the interpretations will be altered. Elder Henry Felix referred to the twelve poles he uses for the Sun Dance lodge like the twelve disciples in Christianity. It raises the question of whether oral tradition has maintained the integrity of ceremonies, or whether ceremonies have always been interpreted by individuals based on the times in which they live. By following a trail of natural progression, can one assume that the emergence of new cultural heroes, spirit guides or patron spirits will emerge within Aboriginal communities to accommodate modern realities? If the culturally accepted methods of other-than-human interactions results in new contacts in that realm, will they be considered legitimate by today's Elders? This remains to be seen.

- **Who is the authority to decide the issues?**

Modern Aboriginal women who take a western feminist view of the Plains Cree Sun Dance and other such ceremonies argue that there are no rules in the origin story for gender. However, this ignores the overall Algonquian belief for numerous tribes requiring women to adhere to menstrual taboos regarding spiritual ceremonies, sacred objects, and sacred spaces. The Traditionalist views vary as well, with some maintaining that the loss of language will mean the end to communication with the spirits and the end of sacred ceremonies while others have adopted features of western Christian belief, the Creator becoming synonymous with the western God. This slight shift from a spirit world which only speaks a specific First Nations language, to one spirit who understands any language accommodates the loss of language.

According to informants, and scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen, those who came before within the culture must be consulted before any changes or proposed changes to rituals is done. For some, this introduces problems of who is trustworthy within a culture that has had such a strong influence from another belief system i.e. Christianity. As discussed, the social peer group does not exist within urban centres which will maintain the integrity of what is being said. At the same time many grassroots Elders have not been raised attending or participating in their Nations' ceremonies, and have no experience or understanding of them though they are asked by youth about them. It is not uncommon to hear modern Elders on the Plains call North America "Turtle Island," despite Elders from previous generations making no such reference. Is this cultural syncretism, or is it filling in the blanks with Pan-Indian sentiments?

- **Generational conflict within 'Traditional' society**

The informants expressed distrust of younger Aboriginal people too, unsure of their sincerity or desire to preserve the integrity of what has been left by previous ceremonial practitioners. They discussed the lack of participation, conduct they don't understand or recognize, and a general breakdown of communication between the generations. (This could be said of all societies nowadays.) However, the lack of interest by the younger generation alarmed them because they knew there were individuals with sacred knowledge waiting to be approached for apprenticeship, and many of them were getting up in age.

As commented on by the Elders interviewed, currently there is a cultural breakdown between the female Elders and the young women of their Nations. Trying to pass on ceremonies, and insist on menstrual taboos which are viewed as punitive rather than

honouring womanhood, is failing. Today's mainstream society simply does not accommodate women to be women as a gender. The personal autonomy of women in Aboriginal societies was accepted, with the understanding that group safety was equally important. Women with a western feminist view do not share the same spiritual beliefs and distrust those who claim sacred interaction, though they make a claim to the same culture. The legitimacy of their concerns must be considered when addressing women as a gender within Aboriginal cultures. If women were expected to act with the safety of their community in mind, the concern for women's safety has not been reciprocated by the men of their community. As well, women have had a breakdown amongst their generation. Informant Sandra Felix discussed the disappointment her grandmother would have when she chose to leave her husband because of physical violence and alcoholism. Feminists would argue that traditionalists have abandoned their women too.

It may be that dynamic individuals with the right mixture of cultural knowledge and charisma will be the ones to define Aboriginal religions in the future. There must be a familiarity with the fundamentals of an Aboriginal belief system, as well as the cultural expectations such as sharing and reciprocity, in order for an individual to be considered legitimate. Elders and informants all held the view that individual desires and individual gain were contradictory to their belief system. Whether this will remain essential to Aboriginal cultures is debateable, as more and more people become part of mainstream society and exposure to many cultures. In addition, research showed a general distrust of community-level leaders who continue to use *Indian* Act elections for a Chief and Council model of leadership, despite its polarity to the previous merit-based leadership choices.

- **Feminism as the choice for many Aboriginal women**

Aboriginal women with a Western feminist view argue that the loss of traditional values, the decline in the treatment of women by Aboriginal men, and the lack of acknowledgement of contributions made by women indicates that there is a social imbalance. It is likely rituals and ceremonies need to adapt and modernize along with social views. The cultures of the past no longer function and the natural progression of women taking more primary roles within ceremonial life is in keeping with modern views of equality. As an extension to that, allowing women more primary positions in public ceremonies will return women to a position of importance within their cultures. By honouring the traditions of the past and combining a modern western approach to equality, the results will be the best of both cultures. Reasoning follows that if women were reduced to second class citizens under colonization, then they too can be elevated to equals just as their Euro-Canadian sisters have been under the same system.

- **Traditionalism and "religion"**

Where the dividing line seems to be is the acceptance of "faith" within Aboriginal religions. Do Aboriginal people actually have a ritualized religion, or is it more an expression of spirituality? In urban centers, multiple Aboriginal beliefs are combined to create an expression of Indigenous culture with psychological precepts that demonstrate desirable social conduct: modern Trickster stories. The origins of the new rituals do not require the methods of other-than-human interaction to authenticate them. Based on some Aboriginal feminist views, and others in urban centers, how sacred ceremonies are formalized is not as important and the intent and sincerity of participating in some form of

ritual. Traditionalism for women in the next generation could be those who separate themselves from mainstream society through Aboriginal cultural expression versus Aboriginal women who become part of mainstream Canada, and adopt a homogeneous Canadian identity. The Traditional understanding of sacred space, spirit guides and spiritual power or "gifting" is being replaced now with more cultural expressions of Aboriginal identity. The creation of a sacred space, understood in the past as the meeting place for sacred experience, is no longer the focus for many Aboriginal people. Rules (protocols) for conduct have been replaced with "sincerity of the individual."

In the future, if it is not already the case, "outsiders" participating in Aboriginal ceremonies will be Aboriginals. A pessimistic view would see the disappearance of sacred ceremonies such as the Plains Cree Sun Dance, as fewer individuals apprentice, fewer youth are fluent in their language, and the prevalence of doubt dismisses sacred interactions whether they are valid or not. Further research is needed to get an accurate picture of Aboriginal practioners in modern times, and what are the views of youth who attend ceremonies. However, there are *very* few Aboriginal scholars in the field of Indigenous religions, and the belief that non-Native scholars cannot adequately convey Aboriginal cosmology has discouraged non-Indigenous scholars from entering the field. It has become an Aboriginal rights issue, rather than an academic pursuit that could aid in the retention of belief systems for Aboriginal youth.

A positive view of the future would see further research done into the new emerging belief systems, and the acknowledgement that urban centres don't just have Pan-Indian precepts. There will be the acceptance that urban Aboriginal populations are as unique as

traditional societies, and are forming new religions and traditions that best serve these new societies (just as past societies have done). By following what previous ethnologists and anthropologists have contributed, it can be assumed that Aboriginal ceremonies will not disappear completely but change and adapt. By following the testimony by prior religious practitioners, interaction with the other-than-human world is continuous and available to those who believe in the possibility. Assuming informants understood their own religions and how contact with the sacred was made, new ceremonies, songs and rituals will be available to people in the future too.

The issue of sexual equality within Aboriginal ceremonies will not be decided in the near future as the forum for such a debate is unclear. Some would say the different contributions by men and women within the ceremonies *is* equal, and the taxing position as primary practitioner should go to men because women are already overburdened with their obligations to family and community. Unlike western religions, Aboriginal religions do not dismiss women's experiences with the Divine.

Through the research conducted, there are issues of identity and acceptance within "Indian County" that need to be addressed before the issue of sexual equality can be put forth. There are changes within all First Nation societies from a communal mindset, to a focus on immediate family or individual needs. There is resistance that this is in fact the case, but the statistics gathered by the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples displayed the discrepancies of material wealth, retention of culture, and access to resources amongst Aboriginal peoples. There also needs to be a common understanding of what is tradition, what is culture, what Pan-Indianism is and what constitutes religion.

Further research is difficult when the people themselves are unclear on what information is being sought after.

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Appendices

Summary of Project / Research Design

The proposed research project is for the completion of a Masters Thesis in Religious Studies. Aboriginal Elders from the area of North-Central Saskatchewan will be interviewed regarding their views on the current status of sacred ceremonies and the role women have within the ceremonies. This area of Saskatchewan has Aboriginal Elders from Dene, Cree and Dakota Tribes. I will be interviewing both male and female Elders.

The participants will be solicited through other Elders. I have Cree family from the area of Prince Albert, and will rely on them and their reputations to request interviews on my behalf. This is to ensure to the participant that my intentions are upfront. By having another respected Elder present me, there will be a stronger feeling of trust on behalf of the interviewing Elder. Because I am unknown to many Elders in the area, to address any Elders, I must have a familial connection to the area. This ensures not only my academic integrity; it also ensures that I will be held accountable by my family. As a result of the history and relationship between academia and the Aboriginal community, this is the only culturally accepted way to address an Elder now for this type of information. Once a meeting has been arranged by my family member, tobacco and a small gift (cloth/food/money) will be given to the Elder participant.

At this point, I will explain my reason for the interview and the topic. I will then let them know that they can refuse to answer any question. The acceptance of an offering of tobacco holds an Elder to the person seeking advice or knowledge. Because my topic may be uncomfortable for some, although they have accepted the tobacco, we will both understand that I am not holding them to answer every question. I will then ask them to sign a consent

form (Attachment A). The form must be brief because most Aboriginal Elders are extremely apprehensive about signing anything. In my previous work with Elders, they will simply refuse to sign anything. There is a trust issue based on history, but also the cultural significance of requesting information. They will prefer that I just listen, rather than be concerned about forms, and tape-recorders and the like.

I will let them know that I will be tape recording them, and if they wish to speak in their own language they may. I will hire a translator to transcribe what they say. They will also be told this. After the gift, tobacco and consent form is signed I will begin the interview. I will be following the questions I have written (Attachment B), but in most cases, an Elder will decide what they want me to know despite being asked a direct question. I will have to let them guide the interview, and may ask questions that are not on my list, but that may come up as they are talking.

5. Please list any requests you may have with regards to your interview:

_____

_____

_____

_____

I agree to voluntarily participate in the research project with Leta S. Houle.

Signature_____ Date_____

I acknowledge receiving a copy of this consent form.

Signed _____

Attachment B - Questions to be asked by Leta Houle to Elder Participants

1. What is your name and where were you born?
2. What Nation are you from?
3. Have you always participated in ceremonies?
4. Have you noticed a difference in the way women behave, from when you were younger?
5. What role do women have in ceremonies?
6. Do you think they know their role now (in today's society)?
7. What do you see happening in the future for ceremonies?